

Social Media: 101

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Rating:

Mature

Archive Warning:

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Fandom:

僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationship:

Ashido Mina & Bakugou Katsuki & Kaminari Denki & Kirishima Eijirou & Sero Hanta

Character:

Bakugou Katsuki, Midoriya Izuku, Bakugou Mitsuki, Masaru Bakugou, Best Jeanist, Kirishima Eijirou, Ashido Mina, Sero Hanta, Kaminari Denki, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Katsuki Bakugou & Eijiro Kirishima, Katsuki Bakugou & Kaminari Denki, Katsuki Bakugou & Mina Ashido, Katsuki Bakugou & Sero Hanta, Katsuki Bakugou & Midoriya Izuku, Detective Tsukuuchi, Sakamata Kuugo | Gang Orca, Present Mic, League of villains - Character

Additional Tags:

Bad parent Mistuki Bakugou, Dissociation, Stalking, Severe Harassment, Minor sexual harassment (through phone only), PTSD, Verbal Abuse, Isolation, Bullying as a form of abuse, Stress, asexual bakugou, Deku is a sweetheart but still a stalking sweetheart, The harassment gets ugly here guys, Supportive Bakusquad (My Hero Academia), Protective Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Dadzawa, Dad Might, Gaslighting, Threats, Therapy as a form of control, Masaru Bakugou is complicated, Protective Kirishima, Shock Collar (Basically), Social Anxiety Bakugou, Not great at Communication Bakugou (Hello Canon Compliant Tag), Denki tries his best but he suffers from foot in mouth Syndrome, Angst, Hard Circumstances, Chronic Blood Sugar Drop, Hurt/Comfort, Recovery, Trauma, Found Family, Friendship, Quirks Used abusively, Badass Best Jeanist, Sweetheart Gang Orca, Teenagers aren't Psychiatrists- they gonna fuck up, Whump, No shipping, uncomfortable scenes are very

uncomfortable, Dark, Bakugou suffers, emotional exhaustion, According to the reviews this makes a lot of people cry, quirk marriage, Quirk Biology, Emotionally Abusive Relationships, Discussion of suicide possibility, discussion of suicidal thoughts, The kids try their best but they aren't psychologists god damn it, Bad Coping Skills

Language:

English

Series:

Part 1 of [Social Media: 101 Series](#)

Collections:

[Hin_](#), [BKG AC](#), [progress](#), [Behold the Sacred Texts](#), [Bnha Bookclub](#) [Discord Recs](#), [BNHA Disabilties](#), [bakugou angst for heart](#), [fics i will read for ever and ever and ever and ever](#), [Best Fics of All Time](#), [the pickiest and pettiest](#), [Bunny's corner discord recs!](#), [bnha fics that are very very close to killing me](#), [Bakugou centric kinda fics](#), [Long Fics to Binge](#), [BKG Fic-List](#), [The Best of BNHA Fics for Picky Readers](#), [Books Read - Not Completed](#), [Road to Nowhere Discord Recs](#), [Creative Chaos Discord Recs](#), [Mha Fanfics to read when done](#), [SakurAlpha's Fic Rec of Pure](#) how did you create this you amazing bean, [Best of My Hero Academia](#), [Makes me Cry T_T](#), [Almost every Bakugou fanfic I have read](#), [The Goodest Shit™](#), [International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs](#), [Best Bakugou-centric with plot focus \(that|deserve|attention\)](#), [Angsty Katsuki is the best type of story <3](#), [Boom Bitch💣](#), [To be or not to be completed](#), [Top Notch MHA \(mainly bakugou cos he fascinates me\)](#), [not completed bkg fics](#), [Favorite Bakugou Angst with a Dash of Fluff](#), [Fanfics_That_Inspire](#), [Parental Trauma](#), [ilikedthis](#), [Magna Opera](#), [Im obsessed with these](#), [BNHA Fics That I NEED to be completed](#), [miQ_y's fav fav fics](#)

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Chapters: 27/?

Social Media: 101

by [Windschild8178](#)

Summary

Part 1: Survival Guide to Fucking Up

[Solely Bakugou's point of view]

Katsuki Bakugou doesn't have a gentle bone in his body. He's aggressive in everything he does and does everything with 100% of his heart in it. After the Sport's Festival, Katsuki starts to get harassed by strangers for his unheroic demeanor. It starts with letters but it doesn't end there. The moment Katsuki realizes the harassment has entered dangerous territory and he needs to tell someone, it's already too late.

Part 2: Post Traumatic Life Disorder

[Point of View opens up to Bakugou, teachers and classmates]

When the Dorms are finally built, everyone is settling in well, but things become tense as people begin to realize something isn't right with the recently rescued Bakugou.

[Canon compliant right up to after the License Exam]

Part 3: Aizawa's Made Up Guide to Untraumatizing Kids

With a High Profile Trial being launched, a media disaster at hand, and the League back in the game Aizawa decides mandatory therapy sessions for all his kids are going down and Katsuki Bakugou isn't allowed to leave UA without him by his side until he's eighteen god damn it.

We See you

Chapter 1: We See You

That Icyhot bastard made him look like an absolute fool. Katsuki clenches his fists as he listens to the crowd above them chattering and Midnight droning on. He hates this. He'd honestly thought Todoroki was going to take him seriously, to go all out on him. The thrill of being taken seriously, listened to for fucking once, the look in his eyes had changed for a moment and Katsuki had thought...

"...and of course the award ceremony," Midnight is saying.

Katsuki's head shoots up and he gives her a withering glare.

"No. I'm not doing that shit. You saw, didn't you? That fucking piece of shit didn't think I was good enough to fight. I'm not going up there to accept some... some fucking pity medal I didn't earn."

"This isn't a choice, Bakugou, you consented to follow through with the award ceremony when you agreed to continue in the final rounds of the tournament."

"Give it to Icyhot then. I'm not taking first place. I didn't win."

"Giving up was Todoroki's decision," Midnight said calmly, talking to him like he was a fucking child. "First place is rightfully yours. You earned it."

"You saw the shit he did to Sero. You saw his fight with Deku!" Katsuki growled. "I didn't earn shit."

"Bakugou! This tournament isn't about you! This is a school wide event that is hosted internationally! We are expected to present the winners up there whether you like it or not! This is not the time to

throw a temper tantrum!”

Temper tantrum.

He hates that shit.

He recognizes the game she's playing from a mile away because his mom pulls that shit all the time. Calling him a spoiled brat and a child any time he disagrees with her. Like just being an adult always makes her right.

He scoffs.

“You can label it with whatever fucking negative connotations you want to make me feel bad, but I'm not fucking going. I said NO!”

He intends to slam the door but a purple mist surrounds him, he half turns, feeling a deep seeded betrayal as he looks her in the eyes. It feels too much like being back in the alley at fourteen to see the tar surrounding him on all sides. For a split second he can see guilt there, but he's already falling. His legs giving out under him and the world goes dark before he has time fully process that he's just been betrayed by someone he's supposed to trust.

In the end, the bitch doesn't have the balls to take the restraints off herself after the awards are 'handed out'. Instead, when he's brought back down from the stage, it's a couple of nameless fuckers who take it off of him. He spits venom at the two lackies, but he knows it's not their doing. The medal's ribbon is still in his mouth and the crowd above sound like a locomotive train as they all get up to start leaving as one.

Everyone is leaving.

The Sport's festival has come to a close and Katsuki is left with this boiling anger in his chest that he doesn't know what to do with. He's clenching the medal in his hands, but All Might is gone. No longer within throwing distance.

That bitch Midnight is nowhere to be seen either.

He hasn't stopped shaking in rage since he'd woken up on the stage

with his hands bound and metal around his face. There's a brief moment of 'how could they' that's quickly overrun by the sheer humiliation and shame he feels. He hasn't looked anyone in the eye, but he knows his classmates are staring at him.

He knows everyone is staring at him.

Not even in the arrogant or self-conscious way either. They're fucking openly staring like he's some circus attraction. There's no subtleness and no delusions about what's going on. Every eye at the stadium has been following him.

He has to spend most of this time focusing on his breathing. Because his breath feels thick in his chest, not like after a fight, but like its expanding past its natural abilities and taking up every crevice in his body with hot, heavy lead. It's hard not to just... find a spot and sit down for forever.

But he's not weak.

So he stands and he packs his stuff up in his bag and throws it over his shoulder, never loosening his grip on that fucking metal. He feels like if he lets go, if he doesn't find a suitable target to launch it at, and it stays with him then he has to accept it. And he's fucking not going to accept any of this sh...

Something hits his face.

He feels wet slime touching him and for one awful moment, he thinks the Sludge villain is back. His hands spark automatically and he whirls, but the crowd of people have left a gap between him and them and the slime is small. He touches his face and his fingers come back with... Mustard? Ketchup?

He looks down and splattered on the ground is a half-eaten burger.

Who the fuck...?

He looks around but no one in the crowd is looking directly at him. They have their eyes downcast and everyone is moving quickly away from him. Why would... Katsuki mentally falters even as he keeps his eyes angrily looking about.

Who would do something like that?

More so, why is the crowd protecting the asshole?

Katsuki wipes the stuff off his face, more confused than upset, though definitely that too. He didn't even want the medal. Surely, they could see that Katsuki hadn't wanted it. He hadn't wanted anything to do with the ceremony.

He wasn't some fake.

He wouldn't take a medal he hadn't earned.

So why? He exits the stadium with sticky hands and a sticky face. All the bathrooms being crammed full of people he didn't want to deal with. He spots Deku far ahead of him. Heading in the same general direction. Arm bandaged and obvious wrappings around his head. His mom probably had a long shift at her job.

His dad was out of town and the hag would never bother to pick him up.

He was on his own.

Midnight has been waving around a book on 'First Generation Hero Art' for the past two hours. He feels his eyes tracing it in fury. Every inch of him is agitated, picturing himself launching the medal straight at her fucking head. He can't do that though. As much as he wants to, he can't launch a medal at a person's head because that's lethal if she isn't paying attention.

It's not like in the fight with Deku where he knows the nerd already knows what he's about to do and will dodge him. He desperately wants to hurt her. Take her down in a match so hard she never tries to do that again. He doesn't want her fucking apology but he wants her to know what she did was fucked up.

He wants everyone to know what she did was fucked up.

No one does though.

And that makes him falter.

Katsuki's the one getting wary looks.

Not her.

No one seems to have even questioned her. It's not like Katsuki attacked her. All he did was say no. All he did was walk away. Refuse to participate.

"This is one of a select few signed copies," Midnight says proudly, flipping the book open, I've printed out packets Yaoyorozu is passing around since the passage I've highlighted here isn't in your textbooks. I want you to browse through the topics and pick one to further research for your next paper."

There's a groan that rises up like a tidal wave among his classmates.

Bunch of fucking lazy pieces of shit.

It's why most of them didn't make it past the second round. When Ponytail gets to his desk, she puts the packet down on the corner of his desk in a hesitant manner, like he's going to bite her head off right here and now. Katsuki sends her an annoyed glare that sends her skittering ahead to give the next one to invisible chick.

He can practically feel Deku's busted up ass staring at the back of his head disapprovingly. That judgmental, condescending piece of shit. Ponytail is the one acting like a fucking deer in the headlights when she's in a heroics class and should have a better spine. That's not his issue.

But of course, fucking Deku thinks it is.

All the fucking time.

When class ends he clenches the medal in his hands and walks up to Midnight. She stands straighter, eyeing him warily, but defiantly. Yeah. She fucking knows she was in the wrong. He can tell. Just as well as he can tell that she's not going to admit to it.

And in the end, like always, he's going to be the bad guy.

Might as well own it.

Before she can pull her shitty quirk out, he detonates. The loud 'bang!' shocks the few classmates still lingering by the door. They look at him as if he's insane as the teacher's desk smolders. Straight through the center of her oh so precious book on the 'First Generation Hero Art' and into the desk itself, the first place sport's festival medal is now fully imbedded into the wood. It had only taken on super focused explosion directly behind the medal to do it.

To her credit, Midnight doesn't flinch, she glances down at the desk and nods.

"That's fair."

And then she packs up and leaves.

Distinctly unsatisfied but admittedly feeling a little better than before, he too moves past his still stunned classmates to lunch.

"What just happened?" Grape stain whispers, terrified.

Katsuki lets a small smirk take over his face.

As it turns out, the Sport's festival did not end up being one shitty day.

It was the start of things going downhill in every aspect of his life.

The first letter comes in a deceptively pretty envelope. Gold lettering. Vanilla crisp, expensively looking paper. He unfolds it carefully in curiosity. He's been so busy with UA schoolwork that he's honestly clueless to what this could be. Exams fast approaching after the conclusion of the Sport's Festival has him raising an eyebrow at it.

The first thing he notes is that it's from a hero who attended. Aizawa had mentioned the internships but he hadn't thought that letters would be coming from agencies so soon. He's careful not to rip the paper as he opens it up, feeling a bit of reverence for it and excitement that he'd never allow his classmates to see.

This was it.

Actual hero work.

Katsuki reads the letter.

His excitement dies away. He feels as if he's just swallowed burned popcorn on accident. Like he had a handful of buttery, fluffy popcorn and shoved it in his mouth and immediately began to choke on it. Spitting out ashy, burnt shit, a taste so strong he can't get it out no matter how much milk he drinks or water he chugs.

His brow furrows and his lips press tight together the further and further down he reads. 'A disappointment to the hero community' stands out in bold. Katsuki is described as 'A feral animal' and an 'abomination to UA's reputation.' His throat feels suddenly dry. Tight.

Katsuki puts the letter down in shock.

He doesn't touch it again. The words seeming to trail him the next few days through his coursework, both academic and hero studies. He'd only read it once, but it seems burned into his retinas. Katsuki's good memory seeming to backfire on him this time because each insult and condemnation sits like an infection in his head.

It's not too long after that first letter when the other ones start to show up.

It might have been that first hero who shared his address or it might have been someone else entirely, he doesn't know. Doesn't really want to know. Either way they come. From bystanders at the Festival who tell him he is too villainous to be a hero while he's on his way to school to little old ladies who 'suggest' that maybe hero work isn't for him while he grabs groceries for his dad to kids who send him badly drawn pictures of himself with fangs and blood everywhere.

He ignores them.

At first.

But there's a little voice in the back of his head asking if he's a coward and eventually when there's a giant pile hidden under his bed, he pulls them out. One by one. He reads through them.

A psychologist wrote to him to tell him he was only pursuing becoming a hero so that he had a legal outlet for his clearly dangerous aggression and that his career would be littered with the bodies of both criminals and the innocent.

There were a few letters declaring him a terrorist whose dangerous quirk should not be allowed to be used in any profession, hero or otherwise, because it was by its very nature a violent quirk. A quirk whose traits were reflecting on the human that held it.

More heroes had written. Some of them were less straight forward, trying to 'kindly' steer him in a direction that was more 'suited' to someone like Katsuki. Demolition work or something 'away from the public.' Some of them were blunt; stating that if he chose to try to

become a hero- something they were skeptical he could actually be, then they would never work with him. He would never intern with their agency and they would discourage other heroes from associating with him in any way.

A magazine reporter had written him asking if they could interview the 'Villainous Hero who'd dominated the Sports Festival with passion and ruthlessness.' There were several other places that wanted to talk to him, he imagined for the same reason even if they tried to sugarcoat it.

For hours he stared at the contents of the letters before tucking them away.

Katsuki blinks slowly as he realizes at some point he'd ventured off the path from his jog. He pulls out his headphones, not quite remembering when it had moved from his smooth classical to the rock music playing aggressive beats.

The path is familiar, but not one he's taken in a long time because it leads back to town instead of doubling back to his home. He's done the run so many times, its hard to believe he could mess up this badly. He's been more absent minded lately, but it's hard to believe he hadn't noticed the landmarks changing.

He's gone out of his way and as he sees an old apartment building he knows its where Deku lives. He slows and stares at it like the building itself is going to come alive and eat him. Why the fuck did he come here?

Sweat clings to him and he sets it off, burning the excess to keep it from getting to dangerous levels. He knows the old convenient store they used to get trading cards as kids was right around the corner and despite telling himself he should turn around, he finds his feet taking him towards the old nostalgic place.

He blinks and he's inside the store. The bell is ringing loudly above his head. Huh. He doesn't quite remember passing by the old fence with posters of movies long sense out of movie theatres. He's dehydrated, he realizes, so he grabs two of the largest water bottles available as he looks around blankly.

He feels eyes on the back of his head.

He looks around, instinctively, for curls of green hair and a freckle covered face, but it's only the store owner. Haji, whose been manning the front since before Katsuki was even born. He's watching him too closely and wonders if the man doesn't recognize him, it has been a few years since he's been here, but the guy should still remember that Katsuki isn't going to steal anything. He should remember that Katsuki has always bought his asshole friends candy after they run out with it because he's not a fucking thief.

"You shouldn't have to pay for them, kid, you should hang out with better people." The man had told him once.

"They're not bad people, they're just dumb asses who think it's cool to smoke and steal. They'll grow out of it."

"Hopefully," the man muttered.

They hadn't.

And they'd left him to die.

Left him and run as fast as they could out of the area as Katsuki had a villain pour himself down his throat to try to take over his body. Not too far from here either, which was one of the reasons he'd stopped coming to this part of town. That and not having friends any longer.

Katsuki puts his two water bottles onto the countertop and pulls out his wallet.

"You're not welcome here."

He blinks, not quite understanding the words even though they're clear as day.

"What?"

"I said I'm not taking your money and your kind aren't welcome here. Get out of my store," Haji says, folding his arms.

"What the hell?!" Katsuki hisses.

"I thought you were one of the good ones, but that was before I saw the way you acted at the Sport's Festival. That display you made was disgusting and I won't have you in my store. Now get out before I have the cops toss you out."

Stunned, Katsuki steps back, his palms igniting in response to his anger and shock.

“Fine! Fine, you piece of shit!”

He slams the door so hard on his way out that a crack forms in the glass, but he’s so furious he can’t think straight. He feels humiliated and confused. He feels wrong footed and uncertain. He only goes a block or so before he sits down hard on the curb.

He’s shaking, he realizes.

He still feels dehydrated, to make matters worse. He feels heavier than normal, his head a little fuzzy. He breathes slow and watches as the sky goes from a bright blue to a dazzling orange. He should really get up and go home before it gets dark.

“Kacchan?”

Katsuki turns his head slowly, there’s the green curls and freckles, set in a face that looks younger than fifteen. Has always looked younger than he actually is. He’s in work out clothes, and Katsuki thinks with amusement that he’d been out here doing exactly what Katsuki had been doing.

Deku wipes the sweat from his forehead, breathing evenly as he looks at the sky and back over at him. He walks a little closer, but keeps that solid six-foot distance Katsuki’s practically ingrained into the shitty nerd.

“What are you doing out here?”

Shitty nerd probably has Katsuki’s normal course memorized. The stalker. He recognizes every abnormal thing about this situation and that kind of pisses Katsuki off, but he doesn’t feel like making a big deal out of it like he normally would.

He stands, too quickly, causing dots to float in front of his eyes and Deku to take several steps back at the sudden movement. Like a startled deer.

“Tch.”

He shoves his earphones back on and hits play, putting his hands in his pockets. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Deku wilt and frown at him, watching too closely, analyzing everything Katsuki is doing

like its all got some bigger meaning or some shit.

Always overthinking.

He lets his mind drift again and before he knows it, he's home. Taking his shoes off and heading to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of water and drinking it greedily, tips of bitterness sinking in as he refills it a second time.

What the fuck was up with that?

'Your kind?'

The letters had used wording like that too.

Like he wasn't quite human.

Katsuki felt sick to his stomach as he stared at the most recent letter. He glanced around himself self-consciously before looking back down at the paper in front of him.

We see you.

That's all it said. Three simple words sitting directly in the middle of a piece of paper. The dumbest thought filtered through his head in that moment, a little hysterical. *'What a waste of paper.'*

It wasn't the words that unnerved him. In the last several weeks he'd received a number of threats, both implied and directly state. No. That wasn't what had him feeling like he might vomit.

It was the picture that came with it.

It was an ugly shot. Being the child of a model, Katsuki knew he had a rather pretty face. He hated having his picture taken though and tended to scowl just to fuck with whoever the dumbass was taking his picture against his will.

Here though, Katsuki was on his way to school, unaware that there was a camera present at all. It was a side profile, he's turned to someone, the tips of green hair in the corner of the picture probably pointing to an occasion when Deku had decided to attempt to talk to

him again, since they walked in the same direction to school every day.

Both wearing UA uniforms.

Katsuki's face sneering at Deku off screen. His face looks unimpressed, eyes narrowed, one hand in his pocket. Which means Deku hadn't gotten to the part of the conversation where he inevitably asked a personal question, he had no business asking. His old childhood friend was as predictable as he was persistent, always pushing just a little too far. Because the bastard knew the line Katsuki drew and it was like he delighted on standing firmly on the god damn line and grinning at him like a kid pretending to poke their sibling. 'I'm not touching you. I'm not touching you.'

"What's your problem with Izuku?" Uraraka had asked once.

Question of the fucking century, that.

It's not like he can point to a list of clear cut grievances. Because Deku never crossed the line. Most of the little things Deku did sounded ridiculous when spoken out loud, like a child tattling about being poked. If there was ever a case of little brother syndrome, Deku's fucking stupid face would be the poster child right next to the definition. Nothing he could say would sound legitimate to anyone, hell even when he mutters the things under his own breath, they sound really stupid to be upset about.

It was all about the consistency and the longevity of it all. Katsuki knows the sound of Deku's two step shuffle as he walks. The muttering under his breath as ingrained in Katsuki's mind as breathing. Katsuki knows the soft click as Deku carefully closes his locker to make no noise and the way he holds both his fists in front of him in a defensive stance that Katsuki himself taught the fucker years and years ago. He knows the loudest thing Deku does is when he claps his hands together with too much enthusiasm before he eats. He knows for the longest time Deku had a habit of hopping out of his shoes because they were just a little too big for him (as most shoes are designed with evolved quirk feet in mind) and the shoe laces would loosen with his constant movements. He knows the shitty nerd still tries it sometimes and ends up stumbling around, startling and confusing the people around him. He knows Deku's obsessive nature involving quirks, All Might, and heroes. The pile of notebooks he carries around and writes in. The ridiculous amount of merchandise he has. The videos he puts on replay over and over and over and over and over again so that he

can catch every tiny detail.

And that Katsuki himself somehow became one of Deku's obsessions.

How does he explain to his classmates all the little things that mean nothing? All the harmless little inconveniences and annoyances. All the questions that were too personal or too specific, like he was being dissected. Being followed and watched, feeling those too big, green eyes on him even when he hadn't realized Deku was anywhere near him just the moment before.

Deku didn't know what 'personal space' meant. There had been times he'd wondered if the shorter teen had some kind of Asperger's or social disorder of some kind. He took every 'don't follow me' or 'leave me alone' as a personal challenge, it seemed to do exactly what Katsuki had asked him *not to do*.

Now, when he saw Deku in the corner of his eye, it was just habit to snap at him. A reflex. Cause even though he knew it wouldn't do any good, he wanted the reassurance for himself that Katsuki had done everything in his own power to stop it from happening. It made him feel like it wasn't his fault.

Of course, that only made Katsuki look like the crazy one when it came to Izuku Midoriya.

"What's your problem with Izuku?"

Those words make him want to throw his hands up in the air in exasperation. To bang his head against the wall. To scream into the void and tear his own hair out. Your problem. Your fault. Your issues.

'You're the one causing problems, Katsuki.'

'Izuku is so sweet, I don't understand why you don't want to be his friend.'

'Can you explain why you set off an explosion in his face?'

'He hasn't even said anything to you yet! Take a chill pill. He doesn't deserve you treating him like that.'

His first thought when spotting Deku walking into the hero course wasn't to question how the quirkless kid got into the class, or even to wonder what the hell he pulled off in the entrance exam to get there. No. Katsuki never doubted Deku had the brains or wit to claw his way

here. The moment he saw Deku enter into his class he felt his whole being wilt in exhaustion and he thought: 'I need to transfer to 1B.'

All of his threats and his anger and Deku still followed him.

He was aware enough to know that Katsuki wasn't the reason Deku was here. That Deku wanted to be a hero more than anything. But it *felt* like it.

Katsuki asked for the transfer papers from Aizawa the end of that first day. He couldn't be in the same class as Deku. Not for another three years. It spelled trouble. There was no one he clashed with more. Katsuki was a pretty calm person as long as no one bothered him, but Deku was *always* bothering him. He didn't want that.

"Can I ask why?" Aizawa asked.

Katsuki pointed at the seat directly behind his own, empty now that school had let out, the shitty nerd glancing at him questioningly as he'd left the classroom a few minutes ago.

"I don't get along with De... with the Midoriya kid. I'm not trying to be a pain. I just feel like I'll have a better school experience if I can work away from him."

"Alright, but you'll need to get your parents to sign."

Katsuki's whole world darkened.

"Is there any way around that?" Katsuki asked, and if there was a pleading tone to his voice, Aizawa didn't acknowledge it.

"I'm afraid not."

To his utter lack of surprise, both of his parents refused to sign the papers.

"I just need you to be on my side this one time," he begged them.

"You need to resolve your issues with Izuku, Katsuki, you can't keep up this attitude with him," his mom had snapped. His dad had given him an apologetic smile, but had agreed with the Hag. A rare occasion aligning perfectly with Katsuki's shit luck.

When he gives the crinkled, unsigned papers back to Aizawa the next morning, its with such a resigned air of depression that his teacher is startled.

“I tried,” Katsuki muttered, a little hysterically, under his breath. When he sits down at his seat, and feels worried, green eyes on the back of his head, he lets himself fall a little less steadily with a ‘thunk’ that he knows has the nerd wincing without ever seeing it.

This is his life.

He thinks the same thing as he looks down at the picture of himself. Deku just out of sight of the camera’s eye. And wasn’t that just the perfect parallel? His ugly expression while no one can see what Deku is doing. He laughs a bit hysterically at the words

We see you.

It’s so fucking ironic that no one actually does.

Two Sides of a Coin

Chapter Summary

Katsuki does his internship with Best Jeanist and has a confrontation with his mom

Chapter 2: Two Sides of a Coin

Katsuki is worried about internships. Not actually going. He's got a great place with Best Jeanist the number four hero and he's confident that he'll be fine. He doesn't really expect too much as he'd done his research and even scraped up the social horror of asking around a few seniors and they'd said it was an over-glorified version of a tour.

Here's some basic shit you need to know about how agencies work. Here's the hierarchy. Might go on some patrols, but you'll be the backups backup. You're here to watch not to engage. Yada, yada, blah, blah. He got it. Katsuki might be ready to engage villains but most of his classmates weren't.

It would be stupid and reckless to send some of his classmates into the field seeing as he saw the invisible chick struggling with a pull up the other day and he overheard sparks talking to the grape fucker who'd apparently been scared shitless during the USJ. First years didn't have the experience or power to be trusted with shit like that and yeah, it was annoying, but he got it. Imagining someone like Twinkles or Koda being engaged by hard ass villains was laughable.

Best Jeanist is also the best of the best. Katsuki respects the guy for the versatility he exhibits with his quirk. Much like Katsuki, Best Jeanist has a quirk that appears straight forward at first glance. The manipulation of fibers. Cloth. Before Best Jeanist had made the scene there was no one who could or would say that such a quirk could be used in the hero industry. Jeanist had done it though. Used it to ensnare bad guys, as restraints, as a pulley system to rescue people.

All with hard work.

The man wasn't known for his power, but for his technique. For the versatile and inventive way he was able to manipulate his ability into something endlessly useful. Katsuki figured if there was anyone he

could learn a thing or two from it would be Best Jeanist. All Might was his favorite hero, the man he looked up to more than anyone else, definitely. But it had been Best Jeanist who had first inspired Katsuki to try other ways of using his quirk other than just blowing shit up.

Katsuki would be powerful, of course, but he also wanted to be known for having earned it. Using his seemingly straightforward quirk for all sorts of shit. Like flight, speed, movement, technique. There were plenty of heroes in the world with powerful quirks, but what made the difference were those people who knew how to be inventive with that power. Who worked hard and had passion and never stopped improving. Katsuki would be that Hero.

No, he wasn't worried about internships.

He was worried about not being home to grab the mail though. So far he'd made sure neither of his parents got ahold of any of the letters. They'd seen the envelopes of a few, of course, but he'd waved them off and said it was school stuff easily enough. The volume of letters had lessened, but it was still eyebrow raising and the idea of either of them opening one up made him feel sick to his stomach and a stress headache had taken hold three days ago that would not let up.

If his mom found out...

Well, it was just best if she didn't.

Katsuki slings his bag over his shoulder, rubbing at the back of his neck in an attempt to lessen the pounding at the base of his head as he walked into the kitchen, trying to be casual, feeling like he was anything but. There was water already boiling in the kettle and he slowly added it to his thermos to take a cup of tea with him.

Mitsuki sat at the table, not paying any attention to him at all.

"Hey, Hag," he said slowly, stilling the urge to clench the countertops in his nervous fit. "I know I'm usually the one to bring in the mail so just drop off my stuff on my bed while I'm gone."

He added a touch of honey as the tea bag darkened the water, stirring slowly.

"Are you expecting something?" His mom asked, swiping left on her tablet to reveal more designer sketches. Her eyes briefly glanced up at him, eyebrows raising. He shrugged as his mind scrambled for a way to explain what she would surely notice.

“Probably just more hero agency offers for later in the semester,” he said slowly. “But I’m also subscribed to quite a few hero magazines and they send me a lot of junk mail.”

Right. Junk mail.

His mom snorted, going back to her tablet. Katsuki felt his stiff shoulders relax marginally. Still, his hands shook as he picked up his thermos and booked it out of the house. Katsuki didn’t lie. About anything. It just wasn’t in his nature and the feeling of doing it now made him feel... weird. Unbalanced.

But he didn’t want to give his mother another reason to hate him.

Katsuki’s not sure when it started.

He knows, of course, that his mom wasn’t happy when she heard from Inko that Katsuki didn’t want to play with Deku anymore. She hit him over the head and told him bluntly to stop being a brat and to apologize for whatever he did.

He knows that when he doesn’t- when he starts avoiding Deku, and Deku continues to follow him around anyway, that his mom starts frowning at him a lot more.

But he’s pretty sure she still loved him then.

When the playground scuffles turn into heated disagreements at school, his mom starts to get angry. She assumes every fight is his fault even though there were plenty he didn’t start at all. Kids, sometimes in his year, a lot of the times in older grades, who think Katsuki is too confident and too mean when he talks. Sometimes he starts it, when someone talks about him behind his back or who thinks it’s cool to get in Katsuki’s face. So sometimes he strikes first and keeps punching because like hell is he going to let someone get away with talking down on him.

Deku.

Standing up for some kid who called Tsubasa fat. Yeah, three against one wasn’t fair, but the kid had it coming. He fucking deserved it. And

then here comes Deku, acting like he knows better, standing up for the ‘weak’ kid on the ground. ‘Oh, hi, I’m Deku, I like to put my nose where it doesn’t belong and stand up for what’s right even though I didn’t even ask why.’

After that his mom’s relationship with Inko became strained.

Maybe that was it. When the look in her eye turned from disapproval and a touch of anger to disgust. It’s certainly when she started berating him more. When she started to say mean things to him when he walked into a room.

At first, he’d been confused.

It started with small things. Assuming Katsuki had been ‘up to no good.’ Calling him a bully even though Katsuki never sought people out. He got into arguments sure, he fought when people said bad things to him, he pushed Deku when the nerd refused to stop following him around, but Katsuki never initiated things.

He didn’t follow other people. He did his own thing. And sometimes people didn’t like him doing his own thing or were like Deku who had started stalking Katsuki no matter where he went.

Things seemed only to get slowly worse from there.

When they went into the school for a parent-teacher meeting, Katsuki had been excited. This was something his mom could be happy with him about. Maybe she’d stop being angry with him. Maybe she’d smile at him again. His teachers told his mom how good Katsuki was doing. His grades. His participation. His awards. How he was shaping up in their quirk training class and gym. He’d expected the proud smirk she usually wore at these meetings, but there’d been a look in her eyes he didn’t understand. She’s looked upset even as she thanked them and they went home.

“Don’t think just because all these people are lamenting how wonderful you are that you can get away with shit.” She’d said on the car ride home. “Talent can only get you so far.”

Katsuki had been left feeling small and hurt.

It was the first time he wondered if she hated him.

From then on, even though Katsuki always strived for good grades and a great academic record, parent-teacher meetings became more of a

stress than anything. His mom, no matter how good what they had to say was, would grip the steering wheel afterward and look at him as if he was, somehow, deceiving people.

He no longer felt happy or proud to present his perfect grades for her to sign. In fact, he did everything in his power to make sure the old man sign them. He stopped mentioning award ceremonies. There were a few his parents got wind of and attended, but his mom always looked tense, and when people spoke to her about Katsuki, she didn't look like she believed them when they said good things about him.

One day Katsuki snapped.

He argued back, aggressively.

He broke a cup in the kitchen in their argument and defended himself and screamed and yelled and... and it hadn't felt satisfying at all. Because the look in his mom's eyes had changed again. And this time he was old enough to recognize the complicated emotions. Vindication. His mom had looked like she'd been proven right. She looked like she'd found something she'd been looking for. Something that she needed.

Something in Katsuki broke that day.

From that point on the house was filled with their arguing. The vicious little comments escalated and Katsuki spent most time at home avoiding his mom at all costs. It's mingled with moments when his mom doesn't pay any attention to him at all, moments when she's calm while he's around, where her eyes don't have any kind of 'look' to them and instead they just exist by each other's side. There's moments when she's even kind, when she smiles at him, or when they have conversations.

And Katsuki doesn't quite know what to do with these little moments.

Do you still love me? Lingers on the tip of his tongue as he watches her. There's a nervous energy about him as he tries very hard not to do anything that might change her mind in this moment.

When she's in a good mood, she often talks to him like she cares about him. On holidays she even pulls him into her side for a hug, gives him gifts that shows she'd even been paying attention to his likes. She sometimes ruffles his hair in a fond manner. Like she really cares about him. She makes his favorite foods often even though they aren't into the spicy items as much as he is.

It's always whiplash when it comes back around. Every single time because the amount of time seems to always be exactly how much there needs for him to feel lulled into the motions, into believing she genuinely cares about him again and then, seemingly out of nowhere, there is a turn.

When she hates him again.

And it makes him wonder if those little moments are only tolerance. If he'd only imagined the fondness. What if Katsuki was an obligation? Those moments of kindness a form of required demonstration on her part.

He starts to regard these little moments in wariness. Because it hurts to let them happen and then go back to the status quo. To allow his mom to hug him and wrap him in her arms and then see the look come back again. Destain. Disappointment. Anger. He can accept these feelings from her more readily when there's no back and forth.

He doesn't ask: does she still love him? Anymore. The answer feels obvious. Set in stone. She is obligated by law to take care of him. Much of the time, Mitsuki is happy, and when she is nice, it is not because she loves him, it is because she is happy.

Does she hate him? Feels like it has an answer just as obvious. The range is more open though. From 'is she upset by his presence' today to 'does she loathe him?' for one reason or another to 'is she pissed I exist or pissed at something specific?' If he leaves the room will that clam her down that he's out of her hair or piss her off that he's avoiding talking to her?

It's gotten to the point were a simple: "Katsuki, can you get that?" Said in a neutral voice with no anger is something that pleases him. That when his mom asks him a question about his day he feels a stupidly warm buzz in his chest and he's careful when he speaks.

Don't tell her about the test he aced because she might think he's bragging.

Don't tell her about the group project he struggled with because it points out how he doesn't get along with people.

It leaves a tiny, boring space in the middle of day to day tasks he can say that brings a pleased sound from her. Nothing too good. Nothing too bad. Don't tell. Don't talk about anything that's bothering you. Don't talk about anything you're proud of. Don't talk about the things

that please you or the things that upset you.

Don't talk about hero stuff.

Because that never failed to make the look in her eyes come back. He learned, when he was younger, to hide his pictures and to be careful about where he put his hero merchandise. To buy more subtle hero stuff. A jacket All Might wore in his golden age. Notebooks with symbols on the inside. A keychain that could be tucked into the pocket of his book bag when he was home.

Because she expected him to succeed.

But she didn't seem happy about it.

There's a part of him that wants to scream at her. Tell her to just spit it out. Did she think he was going to be a bad hero? Did she think he was going to hurt people? Did she think he didn't deserve to be a hero at all? Did she want to tell him to give up? Did she want him to not go to UA?

He didn't know.

Because she always pressed her lips together and gave him that look of complicated emotions he couldn't figure out. Searching. Judging. Finding him lacking. Unimpressed. Finding some part of him repulsive to her.

And she never said anything about it. Her comments never let up though.

"You can't keep climbing forever, Katsuki, eventually you're going to fall," his mom would say.

How was he supposed to respond to that? 'You going to watch while eating popcorn?' 'Would that please you?' 'Will you love me if I fail? Is that what it would take?' 'Would you forgive me for existing if I fail?' 'Or would you just look at me in satisfaction?'

"Whatever, you hag," he says instead, as he tucks the UA acceptance letter back into his bag, regretting that she saw it.

He's not sure what he'd been expecting.

Top scores in the practical and academic. Something he's worked so hard for, fought so relentlessly to attain, something he wants more

than anything else in the world. But there's no pride in his mom's face even when he searches for it long and hard. There's no surprise. No delight. There's only that expectation that he's going to fall and that it's going to hurt and that she has no intention of offering a hand to help him up when it happens.

With the little hologram tucked against his chest, he no longer feels proud either. He feels a bit hollowed out. He thinks in that moment, that when he graduates from UA, he doesn't want her there. He knows she expects to go. That she'll call out of work and take pictures and all the shit normal parents do.

And that stumps him.

He doesn't understand. He doesn't get the little moments of peace. The small periods where she speaks to him in that fond voice that makes everything feel tight and hard. Why does she treat him with kindness and care in those little moments, when in other moments she makes no room to think she has anything but hate and contempt for him?

As he stares at the little chip in his hand's he thinks that he'll lie about the date. He'll tell her it's a week after it actually is. Because standing at his graduation, becoming a full-fledged Hero, there's nothing more terrifying to him than the thought that he'll spot her face in the crowd and it will be that look staring back at him.

Like he's unlovable.

So he lied about what the letters were. Hopes she keeps her hands to himself. Grabs his bag and head out the door not dreading the internship at all, but dreading coming back. The sick feeling that she'll look and see and know and that look will enter her eyes that she was right all along and that she'll point to each letter as documented facts that she knew all along he would never make it as a hero. That it's his fall.

He makes it to the Hero agency in no time at all. He hardly remembers the train ride, spent it listening to music and spacing out.

Walking into Best Jeanist's office is... an odd experience. Everyone in the building has the exact same weird-ass hairdo and yeah, he'd seen

some of the sidekicks in his research of the Pro-hero, but he'd thought it was maybe one or two. Not the whole god damn building. Even the secretary has stiff hair and odd jeans and... everyone here is male. He looks around and yup... not a woman in sight. That's... odd.

Statistically, there's less girls going into hero work, only about 25% across the board. He knows there's assholes out there who care about that shit. He knows there's people who go out of their way to make sure women don't work at their agency, but Best Jeanist doesn't strike him as the type. There's also agencies that go out of their way to hire women which is really fucking stupid. Heroes should be hired on merit alone, regardless of gender.

Still... there's a creepiness to how uniform it is and how even the people look remarkably similar. Not too tall. Light skinned. Male. Thin. Light hair. Almost like these people were picked out for a photo... aw. There it was. That's why it bothered him.

It looks like one of his mother's model line ups. And Jeanist has a men's clothing line which fits perfectly in line with his quirk, but also means he needs people working for him that *look good* in his clothes so that when they're photographed on the streets, it's a form of advertisement.

It's a business move.

Katsuki feels relief fill him. For a moment his mind had gone down a more dark line of thinking he hadn't wanted to put words to and he'd been one step away from turning around and never ever looking back. But business, well, he got that. His parents had raised him to know how the business world worked and how to succeed in it.

He speaks to one of Best Jeanist's sidekicks soon enough.

The jeans, he learns, is a requirement because it makes it easier for Jeanist to pull them out of trouble if need be, which yeah, makes sense, but why are they all so tight? He gets the need to model, but that can't be good for movement. Did they all just rely on Jeanist's ability to get them out of a situation? Did they wear something different when they patrolled on their own?

He grimaced.

Maybe he could get away with doing jean arm guards or something.

The sidekick led him further into the building until they were in what

Katsuki figured was the epicenter. Best Jeanist's desk sat among all the others. Not secluded away from everyone in a closed off room. He couldn't help but approve. It meant the man was heavily involved in the agency rather than the underlings running the place for him.

When the number four hero spotted Katsuki, he made sure to look the man straight in the eye. He would make sure the man knew he wasn't pussyfooting around. He was here to work and learn. No matter how stupid the task may seem, he'd put his all into it... he would...

"To be honest, I'm not a fan of yours."

Katsuki paused.

"Huh?" The startled sound came out of his mouth before he could say anything else. He swallowed, keeping eye contact with the hero as he heard snickering coming from the sidekicks around them. Best Jeanist's eyes bore into him, looking for something. Katsuki glared back.

"And I imagine the only reason you chose my agency is because I'm one of the top five most popular heroes."

Anger rises in him. Resentment. Bitterness. It's like the first letter he'd gotten, an unexpected punch in the gut. This time though, it's from someone he legitimately respected.

"You picked me," Katsuki gritted out. "You requested me to come to your agency."

There'd been plenty of others. Mostly heavy hitters. Heroes with a lot of brute strength but not a lot of smarts. He'd noticed that right off the bat. Heroes who were known for their intelligence had cleared away from Katsuki. He wasn't sure how to feel about *that* but Jeanist had been a light in the pile sent to him. An expert who, Katsuki *had thought* recognized his techniques in the tournament.

He hadn't used the same trick twice. He'd come at each of his opponents in a completely different manner, wanting to show off not just his quirk, but also his ability to strategize and to take down an opponent. He'd *expected* to get the smarter heroes.

Instead, it had been straight forward heroes. Ones who used power to plow through everything. At first, he'd been confused because that was Todoroki or Sato or Kirishima's alley. Sure, Katsuki had power, but he was more than that. Listening to his classmates, about how he'd

gotten lower than Todoroki in offers because of his attitude... it hadn't made much sense to him. It was a tournament. You were supposed to fight. What had they wanted from him? To fight less?

Best Jeanist cleared his throat.

"Yes! Because all I've had lately are little do-gooders, but you're the first in a long time who is a bit more ferocious and my job as a hero is reforming people like you."

People like you.

The stress headache starts to creep up on him again. He holds himself still as he stares ahead.

'You should have known,' a voice simpers in his mind that sounds suspiciously like his mom. *'You should have known better than to think someone actually wanted you.'*

He can hear the sidekicks whispering and snickering not too far behind him. Spoken in quiet tones but still there. Words from the letters mingle with the atmosphere here. As if this hero agency is an echo chamber. 'There's something wrong with you and we all know it. You don't belong here. You don't deserve to be here. You aren't a hero.'

Best Jeanist stands tall, adjusting his bangs to one side as he moves closer.

"Heroes and Villains are two sides of the same coin."

'And we all know what side you are on right now,' seems to be what he's saying as the man's eyes bore into Katsuki.

He'd been wrong.

Best Jeanist wasn't a light at all.

He was a knife.

"So what is it that really makes someone a hero?"

Katsuki gritted his teeth, fists clenched as he's prepared to hear, once again, all the ways he's lacking.

"I will be educating you on how to be an exemplary hero. That includes being aware of the way you speak, your appearance,

controlling your emotions, your morals. There are countless things you need to learn, but in the brief period of one week I will stitch these things into the fabric of your being.”

So basically... everything that made him who he was as a person was wrong.

Whoopie fucking do. Color him surprised.

Katsuki breathed through his nose as he eyed the Pro-Hero, feeling overly hot in his chest as he forces his emotions down beneath his feet. The respect he'd had for the man wavering. Why did *everyone* seem so intent on assuming they fucking knew him? Except for maybe Aizawa.

Even bandaged up and barely standing the man had defended him at the festival. Bitches and bastards acting like they were in the stone ages with that 'don't hit girls' shit. Acting like Ururaka entered the arena just to fucking look pretty or something. Like she wasn't down to throw a god damn storm of rocks at his ass in a literal stoning.

Fucking bullshit.

If that was what society wanted out of him then they were straight out of their god damn minds. Walking around and underestimating opponents because of their fucking gender. What kind of backwards stupidity was that?

“We'll start with the proper way to speak to civilians, Reju? Would you mind playing the part of our civilian?” Best Jeanist asked.

Improv.

Great.

Because that's why he'd studied self-defense and fighting techniques like a fucking starved animal for the past five years. To do improv. The sidekick known as Reju came up to bat, slicked hair and too tight jeans worn like weird ass trophies of pride. Katsuki mentally sighed.

The command was met with an instantaneous reaction. The sidekicks and interns around the office began to get back to work. A young man walked up to them. Grey hair slicked back in that stupid hairdo that was a signature of Jeanist (of which only Jeanist seemed capable of carrying). Hands in jean pockets and a 'happy to comply' smile on his face that unnerved Katsuki.

Here we fucking go.

“Oh man, is that...- erm,” Reju blinked and paused. “What’s your hero name?”

“Don’t have one yet.”

“Right, okay, is that *the* Bakugou? Can I have an autograph?”

Katsuki sighed.

“That is an unacceptable reaction, Bakugou, you never want a civilian to think that you are wasting your time by speaking with you.”

His eye twitched.

“I don’t give autographs,” he said bluntly.

To contradict what he’d just told Katsuki, Best Jeanist sighed heavily, pinching his nose and muttering something under his breath.

“You must always remember that we are here for the people, Bakugou, and that part of keeping the peace is demonstrating safety and security. One of the ways to do that is by signing autographs or taking a picture with fans or by simply talking to them. By doing so you let the people know that you are one of them, that what they have to say is important.”

Anger flared.

“Nothing that they have to say is important,” Katsuki snapped, thinking of the letters hiding under his bed. “The general public changes their opinions on a whim based on gossip instead of facts. Most people lack even the basics of common sense and are spineless nobodies.”

Jeanist stared at him hard.

“That...” Jeanist said slowly. “Is a lot to take in.”

“This kid is hopeless,” Reju muttered, a look of disgust on his face, he looked ready to say more but Best Jeanist held up a hand. The Pro-Hero studying Katsuki like he was a bug.

“What do you believe is a Hero keeping the peace then?” Jeanist asked.

“Securing an area, of course, getting to a scene as quickly as possible and taking down the bad guy as efficiently as possible. Keeping property damage down to a minimum while making sure the general public is safe and that no one is endangered while you do that.”

“That... is actually a very good answer, if incomplete and simple-minded. You are describing a police officer’s job more than a hero, many of whom use their quirks in such straightforward ways. A Hero is more than a security detail though. We are symbols of stability and safeguards against Villains with more devastating quirks than the average thug. We attack, but we also protect in equal measures, what elevates our status from police officer to hero is the scale and depth of our work. Tell me, Bakugou, if you see the general public as beneath you then why do you want to protect them?” Jeanist asked, leaning casually against his desk.

Katsuki scowled.

He didn’t see them as beneath him, he just didn’t care about them. Which he supposed was just as bad. Why should he care though? He’d do his best to protect them. So what did it matter that he didn’t care about their personal issues or their oversensitive fucking feelings? Why did he have to invest himself in their personal matters as long as he was doing his fucking job by protecting their outside matters and their physical insides?

Dealing with people on a day to day basis was exhausting.

And what did you get for your efforts?

Anger.

Resentment.

Stalkers who didn’t know what the word ‘no’ meant.

People who constantly wanted *something* from you.

Whether they were fishing for compliments or wanted help with schoolwork, or they needed some chore done or manual labor or fucking something. And any time people were around all they did was talk about how you could be better. How you could smile more or do small talk or how you could try to be nicer or how it wasn’t good to be so quiet around people or how your opinion was wrong or how you shouldn’t say such things or how you needed to relax or do this or do that.

It's not so hard to just not be mean, you know, Bakugou.

Yeah right.

He tries to be quiet and mind his own business?

A hoard falls upon him demanding he talk or hang out with them.

He tries to be civil and he's called a walking bomb or too tense or too much.

He tries to relax and he slips up and he says his fucking opinion and suddenly he's a god damn monster.

He hates people.

Dealing with them is like trying to solve a puzzle where the pieces keep getting replaced midway through with weird shit that doesn't fit *anywhere*. That makes no sense. And when you say you don't want to deal with the puzzle, having every other person in the room insist he can't live without the puzzle. Shoving him at the table, forcing his fingers around the pieces, until he's jabbing random shit together and failing over and over and over again as everyone else has their completed fucking cube sitting in front of them.

He can't exactly say any of that to Jeanist though.

He can't say that he feels free in the midst of a battle. That everything seems to ease up and that it's him and his opponents. That it's like a dangerous dance of dodging and weaving and strategy that makes him feel so... relaxed and alive. Like mountain climbing, just you and the rock you're clinging to, finding the next good hold and the feel of open-air beneath you. Every part of you is engaged. Mind. Body. Soul.

Because as socially inept as he is, he knows that saying those things is not what these people want. They want some... bullshit. They want lies. About how people are so fucking wonderful and how the glass is half full and everyone has the potential to succeed even if they were born with only one arm and no eyes and a terminal illness eating away at their brain.

He hates that about heroes.

How they ignore reality for idealistic shit. The power of will can triumph over anything! Until it fucking doesn't. Until there's ten babies in a hospital fire who all die because heroes weren't able to

make it there in time. Until a bomb goes off no one knew about and kills an entire building's worth of people before even god damn All Might could do anything about it.

And then the heroes blame themselves like it's their fault a tragedy happened.

It's stupid.

"Well?" Best Jeanist prompts him, still waiting for an answer that Katsuki doesn't have.

Why does he want to protect the general public despite not caring about them? He thinks of the letters under his bed, well over 70 of them by now. Not a single one of them positive in any way.

He doesn't.

He doesn't want to protect them.

He wants to fight the bad guys and that's it.

But.

He could never stand by and watch either. Not even for someone he hated. Not even the people who wrote all those letters about him, or the ones who'd posted videos online talking shit, or the forums and other social media platforms he'd tentatively looked through before slamming his laptop shut. If people are in danger, he just can't picture himself standing on the sidelines and doing nothing about it.

So he looks straight into those narrowed blue eyes assessing him, judging him for existing, for breathing the same air as him.

"I could never stand by when there's something that can be done," Katsuki finally settles on saying. "It doesn't matter that I don't like people because as long as I am here, I won't let anyone get hurt. I won't stop working or fighting until the Villain is down and every person is out of harm's way."

Best Jeanist gives him a long, considering look, not quite approving, but less harsh than before.

"I can work with that," he says simply. "Reju, let's try again."

Katsuki's head wilts.

They're patrolling again. Though Katsuki suspects he's purposefully being led down the most peaceful roads possible while the sidekicks are taking care of Best Jeanist's city because there hasn't been a lick of action outside of the occasional purse thief in three long days.

Every day it sprinkled with failure.

So far this morning Katsuki has managed to piss off three women, upset six kids, and nearly get into a fight with a businessman in the middle of the street. With each failed attempt at socializing, Best Jeanist demeanor became more and more strained.

The worst part was that Katsuki was trying.

Honest to fucking Bob, he was attempting to be civil, but he doesn't know what to say to these people.

"You're the bomb kid!"

"I don't make bombs. There's no mechanism involved. It's chemistry."

Obviously.

"But like... you make stuff explode right?"

Katsuki twitches, holding out his hand and letting his palm ignite.

"I produce Nitroglycerin. I don't make stuff explode. I use explosions from my hands."

"So, you have bomb hands."

"Are you stupid?!"

"Bakugou!" Best Jeanist's voice cuts in.

Fuck. Right.

"You're a real jerk, you know that?"

The man stomps away. The fully-grown man asking questions someone from primary school might. Katsuki tries hard to keep the

sneer off his face. Feeling stiff as Jeanist comes to stand next to him, radiating disapproval.

“You must show more patience, not everyone who wants to speak with you will be an expert in quirks and especially not your quirk specifically.”

“What about some basic common sense?” Katsuki hissed. “Why do I need to cater to every person that comes by? This feels ridiculous.”

“You want the people of your district to feel safe,” Jeanist tells him. Again. He sounds frayed, but at no point does he look it. “Small talk is just one means of presenting a sense of peace for people. If you are on edge then it makes the people around you on edge. If you are upset then it means that there might be something to be upset about. Don’t think of answering questions as a burden or an annoyance, look at it more as... an opportunity to inform the public.”

“Inform them fifty million times a day though? About the same three things?!” Katsuki asks. He’s trying to be respectful. He’s trying. But he hates it here. He hates this pussyfooting around. He hates the waving and the small talk. He hates dealing with people. His nerves were utterly frayed by the end of the first day and now their ashes on the cement he’s stomping down.

A woman walks up to them, a hesitant smile on her face.

“Excuse me? Um... Best Jeanist? Can I have a picture with you...?”

“Of course,” Jeanist says, moving smoothly forward. He pushes Katsuki gently, ushering him into the picture with them. Katsuki is as stiff as a board as the woman leans towards them, her shoulder touching his own as if that’s perfectly dandy. He fights the urge to jerk away. Jeanist takes the phone with the woman’s permission, using his ridiculously long arms to put it outwards.

“Smile Bakugou,” Jeanist instructs him.

He does.

There’s a flash of light.

The woman thanks Jeanist profusely, taking her phone and eyeing the picture. Her face falters, but then she nods and bids them farewell.

“Perhaps...” Jeanist says slowly. “You should practice smiling in a

mirror. Try for something a little less... aggressive.”

Katsuki glowers.

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

His smile is fine.

He hates this.

He should have picked a different agency. Gone with one of the brute strength fuckers. Yeah, maybe he wouldn't have learned much, but anything was better than this utter bullshit. He wouldn't have gotten stuck with a hero who clearly doesn't like him.

Someone who clearly hadn't noticed him or all the effort he'd put in to try to show off his abilities or the hard work he'd put forward to be able to take on someone like that Icyhot bastard. Todoroki had been born with a ridiculously overpowered quirk, but Katsuki had worked to make his explosions strong. He'd worked to not be seen as a one trick pony.

Instead, he got Jeanist.

Someone who'd chosen him to fucking 'fix' him.

He scrunches in on himself as the afternoon crowds start to thicken. He doesn't like being on the streets when there's so many people. They could have a better vantage point from the roofs and it would be clearer, but Jeanist had already nixed that on day one. Someone bumps his shoulder and he grits his teeth, trying to keep distance between him and everyone else.

It doesn't help that the streets are crowded to the point his view is being blocked. This doesn't seem productive at all. If there's a purse thief or a mugging or anything else untold going on then he'll have to rely on his less than stellar hearing because he ain't seeing fuck in this crowd. He keeps a tight lid on his claustrophobia. The feeling of being suffocated slowly something he can ignore as long as they keep moving.

A hand grabs his.

Katsuki twists, pulling the person forward and pinning them to the wall.

There's a loud shriek.

A man wearing thick glasses stares at him in terror, gingerly holding up his camera.

He lets go. Not quickly though. Slowly. Let the asshole know that Katsuki doesn't regret pinning him. Who the fuck grabs someone like that?

"Bakugou," Jeanist calls, gesturing towards the man. "Being aware of your surroundings at all times can help you differentiate *civilians* from villain."

It's not quite a reprimand.

Jeanist turns his gaze to the photographer who now that he doesn't look terrified, is showing anger.

"And perhaps you should not resort to physically grabbing someone when garnering their attention?" Jeanist speaks to the photographer. "Heroes do have a history of PTSD, sir, and that sort of behavior can be dangerous."

"He's a student," the photographer says angrily, straightening his clothes in an overly dramatic manner. "Hardly a case to warrant PTSD. It seems the violent nature reports on this kid have been warranted."

Jeanist straightened to his full height.

Which is not insignificant.

"Grabbing a *child* has much worse connotations to it than a hero, if you see fit to go down that line of reasoning, sir," Jeanist said icily. "PTSD isn't something that has an age or discretion about it either and seeing as he is one of the students involved in the USJ, it is a reasonable assumption."

A flash of light hit again.

That one had definitely not had him smiling.

Katsuki scowls as the photographer flips them both off and stomps away.

Great.

Just great.

Jeanist seems to agree with his line of thinking, for once, because the man sighs heavily through his nose before looking up at the sky.

“Why don’t we call it a day?”

“Okay.”

They don’t talk on the way back. When they enter into the agency, Katsuki sees a few of the smug motherfuckers looking in their direction. He glowers, sending as much icy fury as he can into the single glance. There’s a satisfying amount of flinching back. Jeanist is still watching them though and before they separate, the Hero to his desk, and Katsuki to the large pile of ‘public relations’ paperwork he’s been tasked with, the man stops him.

“A hero is meant to put people at ease with his mere presence, Bakugou,” Jeanist tells him soft, but firm. “I can tell that it is your natural inclination to push people away, to keep those around you at a distance, you will be a successful hero whether you accept my advice or not. You are strong, smart, hardworking... but the difference between a successful hero and the number one hero is how you go about it. Someone who makes it into the top ten makes it there because the people trust them, not through bullheadedness.”

Katsuki is silent at that, glowering down at the ground.

He clenches his fist, thinking of what ‘the people’ had to say about him. He wasn’t so sure that it mattered what he did. He hadn’t done anything wrong at the Sport’s Festival. He hadn’t. The world said otherwise though.

So he turned away without a word and headed to the pile of paperwork.

“Are you really trying to be a hero?”

Katsuki turns to see Reju standing at the entrance to the bunk he’s been given. His arms are folded and he’s regarding Katsuki like he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing. Katsuki, in turn, regards him with a neutral expression, fighting the scowl that wants to take over.

He turns his back on the sidekick, taking his shirt off and changing it out for a lighter black sleep shirt. It's far past the time when he'd normally turn in himself and he's too tired to deal with this shit.

To make his point clear, he flicks off the light, throwing himself into the bunk bed.

"No one will accept you if you keep acting like that," the sidekick warns him, his voice disgusted. The man turns from him and walks away. A sneer spreads across Katsuki's face and he sits up quickly.

"If you're doing this because you want people to kiss your fucking ass all the time then maybe it's not me who has to re-evaluate priorities," Katsuki snaps. "I don't do this so people will love me, you ego chasing piece of shit, I do it because I can get the job done better than any of you motherfuckers. I don't need *validation* to be a hero."

Katsuki turns his back on the sidekick.

He's wide awake now. Anger coursing threw him as if he'd been injected by adrenaline through a needle, and with throbbing annoyance that pounds at his head, he knows that even though he's dead tired, it's going to be hours before he falls asleep. He listened to the sounds of the hero turning and leaving, until even the hallways was silent, before he pulls out his phone.

It's a bad idea.

A terrible idea, but he still puts his name into the search engine and watches as articles start to pile down the screen. He's read most of them already. All the stuff on the sludge incident. Some stuff on the USJ event that had listed his name.

The Sport's Festival.

His mom had thought it was funny to read a few of those out loud to him. That it was a good wake up call. That he should take it as a warning sign to be nicer to people and that she hoped it knocked him off his high horse.

He wondered if he saved a hundred babies from a burning building if that would be enough for her. What did he have to do to make her not so hostile towards him *all the god damn time*. Doing everything she wanted from the stupid fucking music classes to the extra languages... no matter what he did, how far he went, she never had anything good to say about him.

Katsuki stopped on the most recent article.

It wasn't the picture of him trying to smile with the lady.

It was the picture the douchebag took after he grabbed him. Katsuki looked pissed. His hands sparking- something he hadn't even realized he'd been doing. Little bits of smoke floating upwards. That stupid fucking hairdo.

Infamous Sport's Festival Winner At It Again.

He curled into himself as he read the article. It wasn't even some small-time thing. The photographer had been part of a major magazine on up and coming heroes. Katsuki grabbed at the back of his neck, rubbing harshly and digging his fingers into the muscles there. That seemed to only make them tenser though.

Fuck this shit.

Katsuki got out of bed and went down to the kitchens on the first floor of the building. He threw an apron on, a ghastly animal print horror that reminded him of Ashido's hero costume, and looked about the cabinets. He wasn't hungry, so a recipe for something later would work. He broke three eggs, separating the whites and setting it aside to come to room temperature for a meringue.

The walls around him were all sealed tight, he'd been told, with soundproofing so people could train in the gym whenever they pleased. It meant he could use the food processor to grind up a finer almond flour, sifting it and some powdered sugar into a bowl.

Macarons took a lot of patience.

Not only the prepping process but once they were made, you had to wait two or three days to eat them before they tasted really good. When he refused to take meditation or go to anger management like his dad had forced his mom to, Masaru had insisted that Katsuki perfect Macarons.

Because each step of the process required a super delicate touch. The eggs for temperature. The meringue for stiff peaks. Shifting to ensure no big lumps. Folding carefully to make sure no air escapes. The Piping to make sure it wasn't too big so it cooked right. Then letting it sit so that there was a smooth outer shell to it before you actually put it in the oven.

Katsuki always added a little rose water to the recipe.

Black gel food coloring, because if he was baking it then they were going to look badass. And all of this was just the outer shell of the French cookie. Making the cream for the inside was easy enough. A buttercream with a little raspberry jam mixed in. A little lemon zest. A little orange food gel.

It's well into the night and no one comes down. At one point he hears the night patrol march in. Moaning and bitching as they do, stumbling up to the barracks. They all have homes to go back to, but a lot of them chose to stay here most nights. There's an odd comradery at the agency that makes Katsuki feel uncomfortable.

Katsuki cleans the dishes while the cookie shells cool down. He finds a glass container and carefully writes the date when the cookies can actually be eaten, then painstakingly pipes the orange colored cream into the center of the black macaron shells.

Because Katsuki's an extra bitch, he digs around the cabinets until he finds a bright green food color spray and a stencil set and marks KB across the top of each one of the cookie tops. If he's going to let these fuckers eat his fancy fucking cookies then they're going to know who the fuck made them.

He places them in the fridge and steps back. For the first time in days, the headache has gone and even though he's going to be trudging through life tomorrow like an overcharged Kaminari, he doesn't regret coming down here.

The next day, his last day at the agency, he sees Jeanist sitting at his desk with a steaming cup of tea, eyeing one of the macarons both in wariness and curiosity. Flipping it over and examining it from all sides like it's secretly a bomb that might detonate. He's too tired to bitch about how the cookies don't taste right if you eat it so soon and that poison is the last way he will ever try to kill someone so he marches past the desk without a word and starts in on more of the paperwork.

They go on one more patrol.

It's not great.

He's tired and fed up and hates all of this and everyone. All the stupid questions and the fake smiles and the 'public relations' lectures. He feels like he's learning more how to be an actor than a hero and he

tells Jeanist this to his face.

The man pauses, considering.

“I genuinely want each person to feel safe and secure in my territory. For me, it is not acting, even though I can see how you might feel that way because after doing it for so long it does have a tendency to come off scripted,” Jeanist says slowly, like he’s being very, very careful with his words. “Connecting to people might not be your strong suit, but I have no doubt you’ll find your own way to show the world you care though I suspect it will take longer than most to be seen.”

That sounded like a backhanded compliment if he’s ever heard one.

His mouth is downturned as he eyes Jeanist, but he shrugs and the patrol continues in a somewhat less hostile silence. It’s not long after that Katsuki finds himself on a train ride back to UA and a surprising invitation from Jeanist to return after he’s picked out his official hero name.

Feeling a heavy weight dragging in his bones, Katsuki walked through the door to his house and stopped short. Staring at the sight in his living room. His mom gazed at him with cold eyes over a single piece of paper in her hands.

He recognized it immediately.

A thick tan paper with black ink that curved in a manner that spoke of a handwritten note instead of typed. One of those old-fashioned wax seals pressed onto the front. Katsuki swallowed. Normally his hackles would rise at his mom opening his mail, invading his privacy, but today he was too tired. Exhausted from a full week of ‘social training’ that left him mentally wary.

His bag dropped and he stumbled inside, kicking the door closed behind him. His mom still said nothing. Katsuki cringed, shoulders hunching just thinking about what the *last* letter had been about.

“It is my professional recommendation,” his mom read out calmly, “that you do not continue in the Hero course. Your total disregard for my first attempt to help you is a clear indication that you are

incapable of taking criticism or aide. I can only hope that you've been considering my words privately, at the very least, and can see that your aggression and violent behavior are not suited for a path intended for the kindest and most chivalrous of souls."

Katsuki flinched.

"Your clear desire to bring pain and suffering to the people around you is a toxic flaw and this career path is an easy outlet for your violent tendencies towards others. You have demonstrated a lack of mercy and a ruthlessness that is unnatural in a child your age. I can only assume it will grow worse in an environment that encourages fighting, such as UA, and that you will cease to see the difference between criminals and civilians in your need to take down 'the opponent.'"

"Stop," Katsuki pleaded.

His mom tossed the half read letter onto the living room coffee table.

"Hiding shit from me brat?" Her deep growl told him just how pissed she was. "Upset someone finally started calling you out for your shit?"

"Except their fucking wrong," Katsuki snapped. "They don't know shit about me."

"You sure about that?" Mitsuki asked, raising both her eyebrows at him. "It seemed pretty legit to me. I looked her up, she's actually a pretty successful therapist. She knows what she's talking about."

"She doesn't know shit. I've never even spoken to her before, so fucking what if she sat on her god damn ass and watched me from her couch? She doesn't know me at all."

Katsuki's grabbed the paper, tearing it to pieces.

He didn't want to deal with this.

He hadn't wanted her to see the letters 'cause he fucking knew... he *knew* she would agree with the strangers. He cursed violently under his breath as he stomped up to his room, just wanting to go to sleep and forget about this whole freaking week.

"How long have I told you that you won't be able to get away with being a little asshole forever, huh?" She called after him. "Now the whole world is getting to know you, brat! You're going to have to

change or...”

He slammed his door shut, sliding against the wood and leaning against it. He’s was shaking and he didn’t know why. His mom was like a broken record. He’d been dealing with the letters for a while now. He’d dealt with Best Jeanist trying to change him. He’d been fine. Pissed, but fine.

There was just something about his mom that got under his skin, using the things he’d been trying to hide to her advantage. What was the endpoint though? What did she want from him? To be a completely different person?

He tugged his uniform off, the stiff pants and the obnoxious shoes and slipped into some sweats and a baggy t-shirt, crawling into bed. All he wanted was for this nightmare week to end. No more internship. No dealing with his mom.

He reaches into his bag to grab his headphones but even when he dumps the whole thing out, he can’t find them. He curses as he realizes they must have fallen out somewhere between Jeanist’s agency and hi home. Great way to end a shitty week. Whatever. He pulls his blanket over his head.

Go back to school.

Do real training again...

Katsuki falls asleep.

Escalation

Chapter Summary

The Harassment gets worse and Katsuki has a chat with All Might

Chapter 3: Escalation

‘Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.’

Katsuki groggily reached for his phone, blinking at the text message on his screen. When his eyes zeroed in on the words, he found himself sitting up as if he'd been suffered an electric shock. He rubbed his eyes and stared once more but the words remained the same.

Unknown number.

You don't deserve to be in UA.

“What the fuck?” Katsuki whispered. He hit call, trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes as it went directly to voicemail. “Listen here you cowardly piece of shit, I don't know how you got my number or who the fuck you think you are, but you can suck it. I got the best scores on the exams and won the Sport's Festival, what have you fucking accomplished?”

He hung up the phone, throwing his legs out of bed and angrily marching downstairs to make himself a cup of tea. God fucking damn it. First, his school not letting him walk away, chaining him up and making him look like a god damn psycho, then the letters, Best Jeanist with his holier than though fucking attitude and his stupid goody too shoes sidekicks, now this?

Who the fuck gave his phone number away?

He thinks of the Reju asshole and grimaces. It could be or it could have been any number of those smug sidekicks of Jeanist. All looking at him like he was...

Katsuki buried his face in his arms as he waited for the water to boil.

He was definitely getting ulcers.

'Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.'

Despite every instinct telling him not to look, Katsuki swiped his phone open, another 'Unknown,' but different number.

Everyone I know hopes you won't make it to graduation.

Jesus Christ.

Katsuki turns his phone off, breathing slowly through his nose as the kettle begins to whistle.

He sips at his tea but finds himself going out for a run before he finishes even half of it. Steam still wafting the air as his sneakers come on and the door swings open. The cool breeze does little to cool off his anger. It does tire him out though, getting rid of all the excess energy and adrenaline that had consumed him.

He takes a shower, scrubbing at the stupid hairdo Jeanist had forced on him, but its stiff as a board against his head and refuses to lift like it normally does. He tries not to get aggravated, knowing he'll only exhaust himself before he ever gets to Heroics class if he keeps getting pissed over every little thing.

It was far too early in the morning for him to already be in this foul a mood and despite his high hopes that this week would be better than last week, he has a sinking feeling that that hope just got shot to hell faster than a single fish in a barrow surrounded by starving bears.

He doesn't turn his phone on again.

The day does, in fact, get worse. Sero and Kirshima going in on him about his hair. Then Deku stealing his fucking moves. Stupid green lightning piece of shit nerd. Everyone showing off what they learned at the internships and Katsuki having nothing to show for it.

He tries to turn on his phone at lunch and finds to his growing alarm that there are thirty-four text messages and two voicemails. None of them from numbers he's familiar with. He spends a decent portion of his lunch blocking the numbers while cursing his ability to read things at a glance.

An uncomfortable feeling spreads through him as he realizes that some of them hadn't been random declarations of hatred or threats, but of the sexual variety. There's been a picture sent to him that he'd deleted before it could download. He's shaky as he realizes for the first

time that this might be an actual problem.

Katsuki has always hated having his movements restricted.

He doesn't like being around too many people because it makes him feel a bit claustrophobic. He can deal because he's not a little bitch, but there are moments when the suffocation is worse than others. He'll admit that, even if it's just to himself. The sludge villain did a number on his relationship between him and small spaces.

It's whatever.

Katsuki tries not to wear ties when he can get away with it or get onto crowded trains or whatnot but it's not like he *can't*. He can handle it. Even if he has to take smaller breaths and tap his hand against the walls to steady the beating of his own heart.

Now though... now it feels like every eye is on him when he goes out in public and yeah, he doesn't give a fuck what people think, but there's a certain hostility that seems to follow him now that's never been there before. He gets shoulder checked *a lot* and pushed into walls when he's not paying attention. He gets up charged by stores and women, in particular, look at him like he's some kind of monster.

He thought that things would ease with time, but it's been a month and a half since the Sport's Festival and things seem to only be getting worse, not better. Made all the worse by the hag.

He'd given in, a little bit, and asked her if they could go get his phone number changed.

"And why's that?" She asked, turning to him with raised eyebrows.

"Someone posted my phone number up on social media," Katsuki told her bluntly. "My phone is blowing up."

"Is it now?" Mitsuki said slowly, her eyes trailing to the phone sitting casually in his hand. "Adoring fans?"

There's a knowing smirk on her lips that's aggravating, and he feels his shoulders and back stiffen in a way that probably won't unclench for hours.

She waves her hand at him dismissively.

“You got yourself into this brat, you can figure a way out. I’m not changing your phone number.”

He wonders if he admits this has been going on for a while if she’ll cave. If he shows her the letters if she’ll soften. But he thinks of that searching look of hers, the way she waits for him to fail with... what is almost anticipation, and he holds back.

Katsuki grits his teeth and he turns his head away sharply so she can’t see the traitorous hot tears at the corner of his eyes. He storms into the hall and swipes at them angrily, cursing her and cursing the phone and cursing all the stupid ass people who didn’t have better things to do than fuck up his day.

‘Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.’

“Fuck.”

Now going out in public was even worse. He pulled his skull hoodie over his head and kept his eyes down. Not because he was a coward. No. Screw that shit. But he was tired. Exhausted down to his god damn bones. So fucking tired of it all and if he got into a fight with a civilian then there was a really good chance he could say goodbye to UA and that was one thing he wasn’t willing to let go of.

He’ll prove them all wrong.

He would be a hero, the top hero, and he’d do it his way. He’d prove that hard work, being the best fighter, taking villains down so fast they couldn’t harm anyone, that was the way to go.

Perfect victory.

Every time.

As they gather their things the day after Final Exams Deku passes him, a thin, tentative smile before he rushes to join his little nerd group. Katsuki wants to bang his head against his desk until his life stops being a force working against him.

He had to work with Deku for the final exams. That shit was so obviously done on purpose. Such an obvious ploy playing on their animosity for one another, a means to get them to work together. And

while they were not going to win best friends award, Katsuki could say, through gritted teeth, that his tolerance and respect had risen.

He hates that.

Like he's giving in to it all. There's a bone deep tiredness in him as he realizes that Deku really is going to be a hero. That for the rest of Katsuki's life, Deku is going to be there for it in some form or another. He might open up an agency all the way on the other side of Japan, and there will still be missions in the future they'll have to work together for, there will be villains they have to take down together.

He's never hated Deku.

Not even at the lowest point of their relationship.

But he is so tired of being an unwilling participant in the decisions of his life. Adults who feel like they know better about what Katsuki wants. People who insist he gets along with Deku. People who insist that he isn't *allowed* to be annoyed or bothered by what Deku does.

Because Deku is kind.

Therefore everything else he does is good.

He's done this dance before though and he *knows*. Being on good terms means that suddenly their walking home together, that Deku shows up on his jogging path to jog with him, that the 'following thing' he does goes from the mild 2 Katsuki has raged and fought for gets ramped up to a solid 10. Again.

He knows this is in part due to Deku's loneliness. Being quirkless has not been kind to the guy. No one wanted to be his friend and Deku was an extreme extrovert. So any positive show of attention means that Deku is desperately clawing at it and takes hold with both hands at %100 percent.

Katsuki, on the other hand, is an introvert and Deku is overwhelming to him. He had no boundaries and doesn't allow Katsuki his personal time or space (takes it as a personal offense that Katsuki needs it). So every time they get on better terms it's like a horrible, vicious, ugly thing that quickly goes downhill because of their personalities.

And its *always* Katsuki's fault when that happens.

"Young Bakugou," Katsuki turns to see All Might standing there in his

garish yellow business suit. “Do you mind if we speak for a minute?”

Great.

Like he wants another lecture.

Another condemnation. Or a backhanded compliment. ‘You’re great but...’ Might as well be his middle fucking name.

Katsuki slumps after his teacher who draws him into what looks like a teacher’s lounge. He throws himself onto the couch unceremoniously and watches as All Might sits with hands on both knees, back a little too straight. Like an old man that’s been shoved into the body of an overexcited puppy. Formal, but too much energy, professional, but a clear need to move.

“You and Midoriya did very well yesterday. Your teamwork, while in desperate need of fine tuning, was impressive.”

Oh. It was going to be one of those kinds of talks.

Katsuki slumps deeper into the couch.

All Might was fond of Deku. He’d seen it. Deku was his favorite. Neither of them had a lick of subtleness in them. Katsuki scrunches in on himself in dread.

“I know you are angry at Midoriya’s progress...” All Might said slowly. The man was choosing his words very carefully as if Katsuki was a literal bomb. “Wary of it. I can see the animosity you have for him and I must admit, I am curious as to why.”

A well timed intervention would be great right now.

Maybe the moon could fall out of the sky and crash into the school and kill everyone instantly. He’s pretty sure that even All Might couldn’t beat the moon if it fell fast enough. He looks out the window, but much to his disappointment everything is peaceful outside.

“I’m sorry if this is intrusive, young Bakugou, but I feel like I would have a much better idea of how to move forward in your education if I can see the whole picture.”

‘How to help Deku, you mean. I’m just a by-product. A means to an end.’

Because how much faster would Deku rise if he didn’t have the thorn known as Bakugou in his side? He doesn’t believe All Might has any

interest in him at all, only in getting rid of the issues Bakugou brought to the table.

“You ask Deku about it?”

They spent enough time together for it.

“I have. He hasn’t been willing to say much on the matter, but I’ve picked up on things here and there.”

Katsuki winces.

It sucks because there’s nothing he can say. Not really. He knows this game. He knows all the adult wants from him is to agree to be nicer to Deku. Not to help Katsuki. All Might wants a promise that he’ll try to be a better person and to be better to the shitty nerd.

He rubs the back of his neck, digging his fingers into the muscles there.

“This isn’t an interrogation,” All Might says gently. “There’s no need to be tense. You are not in trouble. This is just a talk.”

“It’s never just a talk,” Katsuki spits ruefully, there’s a tight grin on his face as he lets his arm drop into his lap. “Listen, Deku might like to make things complicated, but its really quite simple. We’re too different. Our personalities clash on a fundamental level. Always has.”

Not quite true.

But close enough.

“I’d say you two are more alike than you know,” All Might says, his booming voice ringing with an odd bemusement. “You both have analytical minds and a natural gift for strategy. Part of the top four for your class for academics and let’s not forget...” All Might’s voice became soft. “...that you both have more passion and heart than any I’ve seen in a long time.”

Katsuki looked at the man, trying to find the lie in the hero before him, but he seemed genuine. Fuck. He was good. That line had made him swell with pride and happiness and that wasn’t... He hadn’t been expecting that.

He knows better though.

He knows.

Praise never comes without a dagger or some form of expectation from Katsuki.

"I'll cooperate," Katsuki breathes out in resignation. "On future assignments and team exercises and shit. I'll work with the shitty nerd when it's required. I get the lesson. If we want to beat Villains in the future, then we have to work together from the start."

"That is good to hear," All Might said slowly, "it is admirable to put aside your personal feelings for the sake of bettering the world. However, it worries me that in saying those words, you look more defeated than when pinned to the ground facing an opponent you cannot beat."

Katsuki shrugged, standing up from the couch.

"Half the time I fight Deku, he's not even in the room," Katsuki said. "You're far from the first person who wants to 'fix me' for the sake of other people and you won't be the last."

All Might's eyes widened considerably, and he stood up with a flash of panic on his face, coughing softly into his hands.

"Young Bakugou, that is *not* why I..."

"Save it," Katsuki snapped. "If I didn't affect Deku so much, would you honestly be here?"

"You and young Midoriya are my students," All Might said earnestly. "I want to help you both grow into the wonderful heroes I know you will be."

There it was again.

Katsuki couldn't find the lie in his words or his face. Most adults he knew had that certain look about them even as they said sweet words or praise to him. When they offered help there was always a lingering 'for a price' between them. Not here though.

"What you said before," All Might went on, an edge to his voice. "About people trying to fix you for the sake of others, what did you mean?"

The man coughed again, harsher this time.

Katsuki had to wonder if the man needed a glass of water or

something. Part of him wanted to march out of the room and slam the door in his face, but here All Might was, probably the first adult who seemed genuinely interested in the answer instead of humoring him or trying to find a way to use it against him.

He kept his gaze steady, but All Might didn't waver.

"Tch." Katsuki looked down at the ground rather than looking into those black depths, the pinprick of blue digging into him. "The Sludge Villain, he could smell my quirk, you know? He was so excited to get ahold of me. Pin me down. Suffocate me. He was pissed off that I fought against him. He kept assuring me that it would all be easier if I just gave in and did what he wanted. When I kept setting my quirk off though, pulling him out of me inch by inch, stopping him from killing me quickly, he dropped pretending to be nice."

All Might coughs again.

"I fought him for twenty minutes before you got there. It's why half the god damn block was on fire. He went from trying to persuade me it would be a good thing for him to take my body and that it would be quick to saying what a tough little shit I am, that things wouldn't hurt so bad if I'd just give in, to finally telling me I was a horrible little shit no one would miss when I was gone."

Katsuki breathes through his nose as he looks up to the Symbol of Peace, staring him dead in the eyes.

"Every person I have ever met has gone through that same transition. Everyone starts out impressed with my quirk, but by the end they want me to submit to them, to be what they want me to be."

All Might looks sick.

"That's..." The man coughs, but this time he doesn't stop. "Sorry... that's..."

"All Might?" Katsuki asks, turning to his teacher with wide eyes. "What's... fuck... what do you need me to do?!"

"An old... injury... acting up..." All Might gasped. "This conversation... is NOT... finished."

Each word is punctuated with a deep, wracking cough.

"I'm afraid... I... have to go."

And just like that, the mammoth of a man is gone.

“What the fuck?!”

Their conversation gets postponed though, as All Might is asked to oversee classes for the older students as summer rolls in.

“Katsuki?”

He tilts his head back at the gentle male voice, spotting his dad gesturing at him from the kitchen. He back tracks and wanders in, glancing around for the hag and relaxing when there’s no sign of her. His dad notices but doesn’t comment. Katsuki’s not sure if that’s because it bothers him or because the man just doesn’t know what to say.

He supposes it doesn’t really matter. If Masaru was going to do something about the relationship between him and the hag then he would have done it years ago. As it stands, they both knew it was too late to change, Katsuki had one foot out the door already, so there was no point in making a fuss now.

“I haven’t seen much of you lately,” his dad says softly. “What have you been up to?”

Katsuki shrugs, pushing his phone deeper into his pocket.

“I was studying for exams.”

“Oh! Yes, I forgot. How’d you do?”

“95 on the written exam, of course,” he says casually. “The Heroics was a pass or fail and even though I was paired with Deku for it, we still passed it.”

His dad chuckles, opening his mouth to reply when the hag cuts him off, appearing from seemingly nowhere like the fucking Grim.

“No thanks to you, I’m sure,” Mistuki says as she saunters into the kitchen. “Honestly if I was Izuku-chan I would probably deck you.”

‘He did,’ he almost says, but he presses his mouth closed and stares

down at the countertop angrily. Masaru makes a disapproving sound in the back of his throat and gives the hag a look. She shrugs, grabbing a carrot and biting into it as she leans against the counter.

Masaru turns back, claps with too much force, the sound echoing in the room in an obnoxious manner. As if the sound itself could separate them or stop the impending showdown.

"I'm glad you passed! I never doubted it!" His dad says, too loudly, he steps to the right, keeping his body in between them. "You've got a lot planned in the next few weeks. I-island and then the camping trip? Are you excited? Going to do any hiking?"

"I mean, it will be cool to get out of the city, away from everything," Katsuki says. "I don't think I'll have a chance to do any hiking though. Despite looking like a homeless bum, Aizawa's a beast when it comes to training and hero work."

"Hm... that's too bad. I know how it relaxes you. You deserve a rest after all the work you've been putting in."

The hag snorted.

"I'm going to take dinner up in my room," Katsuki said tiredly.

The hag opened her mouth to say something, but his dad hurriedly gathered up a plate for him. Loading way too much on while banging pots and pans and dishware in a way that if it wasn't his dad Katsuki would be worried they'd break. The warm plate is shoved into his hands without much warning.

"I'll bring you up some tea when I finish it," the man promised, tugging Katsuki forward and kissing his forehead.

"Thanks."

He's not just talking about the tea.

His dad looks tired too as he gives his son a weak smile.

His dad does eventually come upstairs, he sits on the end of Katsuki's bed with a heavy sigh and looks him over, as if checking for injuries.

"You doing okay?" He asks.

Katsuki shrugs.

The silence between them is awkward. His dad spends it looking around the room, eyes lingering on his extensive textbook collection, his Heroics 101 book- a signed copy gifted to him from his dad five or so years ago, every few pages has a sticky note attached to it. Highlighted in so many spaces there was more yellow than white. A bronze age All Might figurine sits pushed to the back, out of eyesight to the casual viewer, but there none the less. His all might inspired jacket hanging on the back of his computer chair. Finally, his dad speaks.

“Katsuki, I love you, you know that, right?”

“I know.”

His dad nodded.

“I want you to feel comfortable in your home,” his dad continues, fiddling with the hem of his shirt, he’s shaking. “If... that is to say... I’ve been thinking that I can... it wouldn’t be divorce per say but...”

The man looks up and meets Katsuki’s eye for the first time.

“It would be a separation, for a time, for Mitsuki and I. I’ve told her that the way she acts towards you is unacceptable. I’ve... I have a place picked out for the two of us already. I haven’t put a bid down yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

Katsuki doesn’t know what to say.

Why now? Is at the tip of his tongue. It’s been years that this has been going on. Katsuki doesn’t have much longer in the house. A couple years before he graduates...

And then it clicks.

His dad has had the same realization. That Katsuki will have a choice about whether he comes back, whether he visits, and his dad must have realized that it probably wasn’t going to happen. That Katsuki had no plans to come home for Christmas or any holiday because once he got out of the house he’d hit the ground running.

His dad wasn’t actually doing this to protect Katsuki.

He was doing this because he was afraid of losing Katsuki permanently. A kind, caring gesture on the outside, but an inherently selfish one on the inside. His dad had never said a bad thing about

him or to him. His dad had never been anything but supportive and kind.

His dad was also a coward though.

He never actually stood up for Katsuki. His small noises and disapproving looks and whispered words had never changed anything or daunted the Hag at all. Because all three of them knew that there was no threat behind those gestures.

His dad was too soft.

He leveled his father with a heavy look before shaking his head.

“I’ve only got a few more years left here. I can deal with it.”

His father’s lips press into a thin line. He looked disappointed, ashamed, small. Katsuki sighed, running his hand through his hair before relenting the smallest bit.

“As long as she doesn’t come, you can visit as often or as long as you want,” Katsuki told him. He didn’t need to explain anything else. His father’s shoulders relaxed the tiniest bit, tears forming at his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Katsuki.”

Katsuki watches his dad wipe at his glasses and turns to the window, his fingers rubbing the edge of his mostly cleared plate in a rhythmic fashion.

“Me too.”

His dad stiffens, nods, takes Katsuki’s dirty plate from him without a word and heads downstairs.

“Hey, Bakugou! You haven’t been answering any of my texts,” Kirishima calls.

Katsuki glances at the redhead. Now there was someone he didn’t get. Between the USJ and the Sports Festival and then studying together for the exams, Kirishima had somehow slipped by his walls and firmly wedged himself into his life without Katsuki really noticing the transition. The radiant, cheerful personality was far from the people Katsuki had hung out with in Middle school and he was lost to figure out what the end game was for Kirishima.

The squad and the Sparks guy who'd called him trash had suddenly decided that Katsuki was part of their little group. Somehow they'd gotten ahold of his phone and pinged their numbers into it before Katsuki could do anything to stop them. To say he'd been confused would be an understatement. There's a voice in his head that says they'll just run at the first signs of trouble, but these slackers had been there during the USJ. Each one of them had held their own. These guys knew who Katsuki was, had seen his first fight with Deku where he'd gone overboard and they were still making the decision to befriend him. So with these thoughts in mind, he's able to push the voice back.

Katsuki kept walking as Kirishima hurried to catch up.

"What do you want?"

He could accept that Kirishima and the others had an interest in befriending him, but that didn't mean he believed it was out of the kindness of their hearts.

Everyone always wanted something.

"The class is getting together to do training at the pool. I thought you'd want a part of the action!" Kirishima tells him, way too fucking perky.

"No."

"Oh, come on! It's not like we're getting together to communicate or something ridiculous like that," Kirishima says in a teasing tone. "We're gathering to improve ourselves!"

"A pool full of a bunch of extras doesn't sound like training. It sounds like an excuse to waste time," Katsuki says without slowing down.

"The pool is at the school. We reserved it only for our group. Nobody else is going to be there," Kirishima pushed.

"You say that like I think our classmates aren't extras," Katsuki shoots back.

But still... the idea that nobody else could go there. That it would only be his classmates was tempting. No public. Moderately adequate training partners. A place where he could be without having to wear a hoodie or a uniform for once.

“Don’t be like that man, they’re our friends!” Kirishima scolds him.

‘Your friends, maybe.’

The idea that any of their classmates could be classified as friends was laughable. Katsuki didn’t have time for that shit. People always required so much attention from you. Constant communication. Favors. They always wanted shit from you whether it was your time, money, energy, to listen to their problems, to help solve issues. They acted like the world was ending if you needed space or time to yourself.

Friendship was just people who followed you around when you asked to be left alone. Friendship was tutoring people. Friendship was being grabbed and manhandled all the time. It was being yelled at when you didn’t respond to a phone call or a text.

No fucking thank you.

“I don’t need them,” Katsuki said shortly. “Go dip your head underwater.”

Everything he needed, he could do by himself. Kirishima laughs good-naturedly which, if he’s being honest, freaks him out a little.

“Alright man, I guess I’m just going to have to prove I’m the best by myself then.”

Katsuki stops short, squinting at the little shit whose side-eyeing him like the manipulative bastard he is.

“There’s gonna be competitions going on?”

Kirishima’s grin is sharp.

“It’s unsupervised,” the redhead says smugly, “of course it’s going to devolve into competitions.”

Katsuki’s silent for a moment before his grin turns vicious.

“Just so you fucking know, I know exactly what you just did there.”

Kirishima laughs again, real warmth in it.

“Whatever works, man, I might not know my way around an algorithm like you or speak three languages, but people? I get people.”

“Just don’t fucking lie or I’ll kick your ass into next week, shitty hair.”

“Never, bro, not my style.”

“Good.”

They go to the swim training and its exactly the kind of mess Katsuki thought it would be, but it’s also strangely... nice. There’s an odd warmth about the group that even if Katsuki doesn’t partake in, it sinks into his skin and into his chest in a way that is grounding and pleasant.

It’s like... days when his mom is in France or America on modeling projects and its just him and his dad at home. There’s no one looming and no expectation of anyone coming home to make the place tense. There’s no need to hide the mail because no one is going to rip open his things. There’s no tension cooking dinner or sitting out in the living room. No need to hide away. It’s nothing like being out in public either. No need to keep his eyes down or hide his face. No need to look over his shoulder.

Safe.

He feels safe with these idiots.

Katsuki walks home with Kirishima. They take the scenic route which is way out of the way, but it means he doesn’t have to wear a hoodie or put his sunglasses on. The sun is setting and it feels warm against his skin as he argues with Kirishima and they talk of the upcoming exam.

It’s nice.

Katsuki invites Kirishima to I-island with him and it’s the best decision he’s made in a while. There’s something so relaxing about being with the redhead. Possibly the only person who doesn’t seem to expect anything from him either with the way he acts or the things he says.

They talk about hero shit.

They talk about future plans.

They talk about stupid shit too.

They take the plane together, spend time in the hotel room together, hang out at all the shops and participate in all the competitions. It's the first time in a very long time when he feels like he has an actual friend. When he doesn't feel judged for everything he says.

Best of all, no one is harassing him on I-island.

There are a few people who give them a wide birth when they see him. A few glares here and there. One of the restaurants they go to serves his soup cold and his onigiri so salted that it would make a family of snails shrivel up into nothing, but he keeps his face blank and eats both with such a neutral expression that it leaves the waiting staff faltering. He makes sure to look them all in the eye any time they come near because fuck that and fuck them.

One waitress, in particular, looks a little ashen and she places his bill on the table with shaking hands and doesn't meet his eye. He plucks it up without a word and pays the exact amount with no tip.

"That's weird, what's up with her?" Kirishima had whispered, looking on with concern.

The redhead hasn't noticed anything odd going on and Katsuki is torn between being exasperated by the obliviousness and very, very thankful for it.

"Not our problem," Katsuki says gruffly.

"That's not very manly, Bakugou," Kirishima reprimands him lightly.

There's a layer of salt in his mouth from choking down the food and he wants to get out of here as soon as possible to wash it out. He gets that Kirishima doesn't know, but it still irritates him and puts him in a bad mood.

Later that day, Deku shows up.

Because of fucking course he does. The only thing that consoles him is that half of the class showed up too. And All Might. It makes it all seem a little less like the world is conspiring against him.

He and Kirishima spend the rest of the day kicking ass together in the competitions. Ignoring Iida's texts about arriving early to meet up with everyone. Getting absolutely lost in the tower because he fucking relied on shitty hair as their navigation (a mistake he knows not to make again).

And then fighting for their lives the rest of the night.

Katsuki's not going to say that going toe to toe with assholes alongside his classmates was a bonding thing or something, but it kind of was. Even Todoroki, with his god awful white suit, seems far less annoying than before the trip.

And maybe the lot of them hang out in the destroyed ballroom afterward and sit in companionable silence alongside All Might eating fancy as fuck food that's been disregarded because half the room is missing and there's a giant ass hole revealing the entirety of I-island before them.

It's not the worst night of his life anyways.

When he gets back home from the trip, there's a week and a half of summer vacation before school starts up again, the summer training camp a nice highlight he's really starting to look forward to. Even the losers (his entire squad of idiots and Sato) are going to be allowed on this trip. He spends it mostly inside, as has been his tendency since the Sport's Festival, only going out for his usual work out and jog.

He makes an effort to place Kirishima, Horns, Sparks and Soy Sauce into his Priority call list so that their texts are highlighted in a bright blue that's easy to distinguish from the shit that's constantly dinging on his phone.

He blames what happens next on the squad lulling him into a false sense of security.

Katsuki ventures out of his home at the end of the week because his jogging shoes are falling apart and he can no longer ignore the hole in the right heel. He puts on an oversized hoodie that he pulls over his head and sunglasses much to his mom's curiosity and confusion.

"What's with the getup?" She asks. It's Saturday morning and she has a shoot in the evening, but for now, she's relaxed, a magazine on her lap and the television on to some show he has no interest in. "You look even more like a hooligan than normal."

Katsuki wants to snarl at her, spit venomous words about how she fucking knows why he's wearing this. He wants to ask her if she's even noticed he hasn't left the house outside of going to school and jogging

in months. He wants to demand she look at their phone history and to wonder how, even if they have unlimited, how their company hasn't contacted them with questions.

He doesn't though.

Because honestly? He doesn't want to have another fight with his mom. She's already made things perfectly clear that he has to handle his own shit. Even if he told her, she wouldn't help him. A part of him is scared she'd be delighted by the whole thing.

"I need to grab shoes," he answers instead, because she's being moderately nice today.

"Wow," Mitsuki says, flipping a page in her magazine, "way to answer my question without actually answering my question. You learn that shit from your father?"

"I'm expert level now," he says, closing the door behind him.

He grimaces as he pulls out his phone, carefully avoiding looking at his inbox to open up the GPS app because there's only one shoe place that offers the kind of support he wants and while he's got a good idea of where it is, he's still going to need it to find the exact place. It turns out to be a bit further than he thought, but he doesn't mind. It's nice to be out and about again.

Katsuki keeps his head down as he walks out of his neighborhood and jumps onto a train. No one looks twice at him. He hears the distant sound of chatter and its relaxing. He can't believe he's thinking it, but he'd actually missed this.

People.

He gets off at his stop. A part of him sort of wishes one of the idiots was here with him. Kirishima or Kaminari or Sero or Ashido. They're a little too rambunctious for his taste, but the way they talk around him, treat him like a person, try to involve him. He can't deny that's it's the best part of his day when they crowd the lunch table he's coveted or bombards him with questions or stories.

Not that he'd ever admit that.

Helping Kirishima study and being an unwilling (at first) member of their little squad. Going to I-island and fighting off the Villains that had targeted All Might. Even the other members of his class were less

annoying than he'd first thought.

He hadn't been willing to let any of them know about the harassment though. The lot of them were too loud and stood out like a sore thumb and any one of them would question (obnoxiously obvious and noisy) why he was covering himself up so much.

So Katsuki keeps to himself and rebuffs his friends (if only he admits it to himself) when they ask him to go out or to venture into the public eye. There's not a subtle bone in any of their bodies, that's for damn sure.

The shoe place is a disappointment. The choices in his size are an obnoxious red, which, no, just... no. He doesn't need another reminder of Deku in his life. He doesn't get his obsession with red shoes, there's not even any correlation between them and All Might. He asked once, sue him, he was curious, and the mumbled, frantic answer of 'they make him happy' had been vague as fuck. He knows the first time Deku got the red shoes was his mom's choice, so it would be easier for the short woman to find Deku in a crowd. Knowing the shitty nerd it was probably some lame-ass sentimental thing between him and his mom now.

The thought sort of stings.

Countless images of the two of them come to mind. Inko showed up to all of the award ceremonies and always looked so proud. She often came by to pick Deku up as a surprise to spend time with him. Had since pre-school. The two of them always looked so god damn happy when they were together.

Katsuki sighs as he pulls the only other color down. A bright ass white that he knows is going to be stained a gross brown by the end of the first week wearing them. It's not great, but he can't be choosy here and the only red he'll ever accept on his shoes is the blood of his enemies.

He buys two pairs because like fuck is he going to venture out again in a few months when he inevitably wears these ones down. The advertisement is shit. Guaranteed eight months his ass. Did they go for a light five-minute walk and then turn around?

But they're the best ones in the area and the last time he ordered shoes online, he paid forty bucks and was sent something that vaguely resembled what they were supposed to be, but with a hell of a lot more plastic involved.

Man, it's hot.

He regrets the jacket even though it provides him with anonymity.

Katsuki shifts again as the summer heat really starts to bake him. It's not good on a day when he won't be training off his excess nitroglycerin. He quickly pops off some of the excess sweat. The sparks make a few people startle from the unexpected noise, but it's harmless. Just meant to make sure he doesn't have build up and accidentally set off a much larger, more dangerous explosion.

His parents had to fill out a ridiculous amount of paperwork as proof for him that it was necessary to do this in public whenever he needed it. There had been a rather unfortunate incident when he was eight that made it very necessary.

"Is that the explosion kid?" Someone whispered.

Shiite.

Katsuki glanced around and yeah. Fuck. That small little thing had drawn attention to himself. Katsuki adjusts his hoodie to cover more of his face and begins to leave the shopping district. He can hear some disquiet, but honestly, it's not that bad.

Maybe people are finally letting things go. The letters had slowed down considerably. He only got one last week. That was great. His phone was still blowing up, but that was... well... it was a hell of a lot easier for someone to send a text than to go through the trouble of snail mail, wasn't it? Showed exactly how extra some of his 'fans' were though, didn't it? And he'd become familiar enough that there were a few whose handwriting was suspiciously similar even though the mailing addresses were different.

Either way, Katsuki figured it was best if he...

Something hit his side. Katsuki world, hands smoking to see nothing. Everyone around him kept walking. No one was looking him in the eye. Confused, he looked down. A slick trail of ice cream was meandering its way down his side from waist to the side of his foot, a large glob sitting on the ground, melting and sad.

"I hope that was worth it ASSHOLE!" Katsuki snarled, causing half a dozen people to steer clear away from him. He let out several more pops, this time intentional. "YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M GLAD I COULD WASTE YOUR FUCKING MONEY DIPSHIT!"

No one responded to him.

No one looks at him.

Katsuki stomped away, feeling fury bubbling up inside of him with no outlet. Thought they were so fucking tough throwing food at him and not taking responsibility. Cowardly motherfucking pieces of flaming garbage.

He hates people.

He hates...

Hot tears are sliding down his face.

“Fuck!”

He hurries along, wiping at his eyes, but the tears are stopping. He ducks into an alley and takes deep breaths, but that seems to only make it worse.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” He screams. The vulgar word does nothing to change the situation though. He’s still a pathetic heap crying in a random alleyway with sticky ice cream down the entirety of his pants leg. He slides down the brick wall and shoves his face into his knees.

He doesn’t want to deal with this anymore.

More than that, he doesn’t understand, there are rough heroes out there. There are heroes out there that struggle with their image because their a little too loud, a little too careless. Did they deal with this?

He’s never read anything about heroes being harassed like this.

He doesn’t understand *why* he’s being harassed.

Because of the Uraraka fight?

Because he was chained up?

Because he said no to the medal?

Because he grabbed Todoroki when he was unconscious?

All of it?

Was he in denial about everything and it truly was his fault? Like everyone said. Did Katsuki deserve what these people were doing?

No.

No, he was sure he didn't deserve this. They were wrong. His mom was wrong. Maybe he deserved a little backlash, but this was not okay. It wasn't. He deserved personal space. He deserved the right to say no. He deserved to call bullshit. He was a person. He had rights too. Even though everyone in the world seemed to think he didn't deserve it.

Besides... he needed to stop this.

He wasn't an overdramatic bitch who cried at the drop of a hat.

He was stronger than this.

He took in a shuddering breath, still feeling the hot tears tasting of salt sliding down his chin and throat. He wiped at them vigorously even though they hadn't stopped.

It was just ice cream. He could go home and change and take a shower and not feel gross. He'd put his new shoes on and go for a run. A very, very, very long run where there were no people. Far away from people.

He can hear the sounds of bustling streets. Chatter and laughter and no one giving a damn about him. Katsuki had wanted to go to the bookstore while he was out. Find a comic book maybe or a manga. Something light and fun to read, but now that feeling is gone.

Why did he think that was a good idea?

Time spent doing something productive. Training or going through his textbooks again. He wasn't going to be able to prove anything if he kept spending time on stuff he had no right doing. He wasn't lazy. He didn't need to come out here to spend time with *people*. He didn't need to see their stupid fucking faces. He didn't need comics or anything.

His chest tightens.

He ignores it.

While he was busy doing his useless internship, Deku was busy stealing his moves and improving by leaps and bounds. His classmates

were all learning useful shit. He needed to train harder to stay ahead of the game. Study more.

He got what he needed.

It was time to go home.

The tears had finally stopped. He wiped his face one more time, hugged the boxes to him, and was very careful not to burn off the excess nitroglycerin until he was in his own neighborhood again.

Sakane Quince had seen the whole thing. His attention drawn to the loud cracking ‘pops’ of mini explosions in front of the shop he owned. He spots the delinquent easily enough. Hoodie hiding his face and sunglasses hiding his eyes like some Villain whose looking to get away with a misdeed. It's all shady behavior as far as he's concerned.

The hooded guy rolls his wrist and adjusts the bag in his hands. A few more pops go off. The quirk explosions have caught plenty of people's attention. It's obnoxious and the use of quirks in public is illegal. The whole thing spells trouble and he's had more than his fair share to last a lifetime.

His customers look nervous now too.

“It's him!” A woman whispers. “Katsuki Bakugou! He's the one that beat that girl senseless at the Sport's Festival.”

That garners his attention. A woman beater huh. He didn't take kindly to those types. Always thought themselves all high and mighty, like they owned their partners. Disgusting. He scowls at the looks up, just in time to see what happens.

There's a guy across the street with his girlfriend. They're sharing an ice cream cone between them and she whispers something in his ear and he nods. He stands up and Sakane feels trouble brewing here.

But instead of confronting the villainous UA student, he grabs hold of the ice cream and throws. The guy, Bakugou jerks as ice cream splatters across the right side of him against his waist. Sakane sees the boyfriend hide his ice cream covered hand in his pocket as he sits back down even as the hooded Bakugou looks around the crowd in confusion, before spotting the ice cream all over him.

Explosions erupt in an angry fashion from the Bakugou guy's hands. Loud and booming, causing people to back up, a few people scream in a panic, his customers retreat further into his store. Smoke falls from his hand and there's a snarl on the guy's face.

"I hope that was worth it ASSHOLE!" A menacing growl leaves the guy's throat. Words becoming louder and louder as he roars. "YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M GLAD I COULD WASTE YOUR FUCKING MONEY DIPSHIT!"

The hooded guy turns and stomps away, palms still crackling dangerously. People leap and dive away from him as he makes his way down the street.

What a disgrace.

That guy is training to be a hero?

UA was obviously slipping.

People are disgruntled now and more than one customer leaves his store, muttering and throwing dark words in the hooligan's direction. He doesn't think much of it. He does glance at his camera thoughtfully though. The guy had been in just the right position to have the whole thing caught on camera. He looks down the street and knows his fellow shop owners too had eyes on the streets.

It's a thought at least.

One he doesn't think about much until his granddaughter interrogates him at dinner that evening.

"I heard you saw Katsuki Bakugou!" She whispered excitedly as she puts meat onto their little mini cooker. "What was he like?"

"A bad egg that one, don't go idolizing the likes of him," he tells her, knowing how she is with the hero types.

"He's cute."

"And dangerous," he warns. "Lighting up those explosions of his without a care in the world. Aggressive and shady, that's all he is, worshipping the likes of him will only get you hurt."

"You don't even know him," his granddaughter mumbled. "He was awesome at the Sport's Festival. Took the top spot. Even beat

Endeavor's kid. It was so amazing."

He grunts, his lips pressing together in disapproval.

"He's a woman beater," he said, repeating the words of the young girls earlier.

His granddaughter snorts, giving him a hard look.

"You mean his legitimate match against Uravity? He won four matches against four strong opponents, but one of them had boobs so he should have been more delicate with her."

"What?"

"Watch the matches grandpa, instead of listening to gossip in your shop," she said knowingly, flicking his forehead as she got up from the table.

Sakane watched her go, frowning. He knows what he saw. He'd just have to prove it to her. Show her the tape. He'd bet anything he could get that old geezer Tomman to give him his tape too if he said it was to help his granddaughter learn some cold hard facts. Men like that Bakugou guy were people you should stay away from.

His granddaughter doesn't know what she's talking about. It's not exactly the first time he's heard about the guy. Just the first time he's seen him in person. Bakugou had been the talk of the town for a while, especially since word was he lived nearby.

A villainous individual, everyone said, a monstrous personality who definitely should not be considered hero material. Sakane had a great feel for people and even in his bones, he could tell Katsuki Bakugou was one of the bad ones.

So he gets the video from his fellow shop owner. Nothing stands between a man and his grand kid's safety, as they say. Well, people might not say it, but he sure as hell does. He puts his own tape aside, already labeled 'Evidence!' in dramatic lettering. He pops in old man Tomman's video feed and fasts forwards through the day until the numbers match up with the time on his own tape.

He presses play.

There he is. The hooligan. Dressed in his oversized hoodie and looking dangerous as ever as he stomps down the street, palms smoking. He stops in front of Tomman's shop, just like the geezer said he had.

Sakane leans in towards his screen, watching carefully. Bakugou swipes at his own face, even as his palms still smoke, and Sakane frowns. The sunglasses are whipped off and the hoodie falls a bit and Sakane sits back in shock.

It's a kid.

Fourteen, maybe fifteen years old. And he's crying. Sakane blinks slowly as he takes that in. His head is leaning forward and tears are falling hard and fast even as the young teen rubs at his face, trying to stop it.

He looks...

Heartbroken.

His shoulders are shaking and he's biting hard at his lip. He grabs at the hoodie and pulls it further over his face, eyes swiveling around before they seem to find what it is he's looking for before the kid darts forward. Into an alley.

He's hiding, Sakane realizes with sinking dread.

Because someone has thrown ice cream at this child. This kid had gone out in public, hiding his face, and he'd had ice cream thrown at him. He'd been upset. Left. And had started sobbing in the middle of the street. Found a place to hide. A dirty alley.

And then what?

Morbidly fascinated, knowing the alley had no outlet, he presses fast forward.

There's a time lapse of about twenty minutes before the kid shows up in the feed again exiting the alley. His face is swollen and red as he shoves the sunglasses back on. He hugs the shopping bag to his chest and keeps his face down as he walks away with hunched shoulders.

He's younger than his granddaughter, is the first thought that filters into his mind long after he's stopped the video. Why hadn't he realized that? He was a participant in the UA sport's festival. Those people had to be at least eighteen, right? Seniors? They wouldn't let

kids participate in a competition like that.

He googles it.

No. Freshman. Little teeny boppers. Sakane listens to his granddaughter for the first time in a while and pulls up the Sport's Festival feed. He watches it the whole way through, feeling sicker and sicker as he watches them boo the boy for fighting the little round faced girl. She sends down a hurricane of rock and debris that makes him feel like he's going to have a heart attack.

The kid calmly blows it away.

This is the fight people have been talking about? He watches the match again. The boy is on the defensive from the start. The girl trying to attack over and over again. Pushed back by the explosions.

This?

This fight?

He hears the crowd booing the kid. He watches as heroes and civilians alike stand up and start throwing insults the boy's way. The kid looks grim at the words, but he doesn't take his eyes off the girl.

He watches the matches after. Against the hardening quirk kid, against the dark shadow, against the monstrous ice powers kid who froze his classmates and half the stadium. He watches the awful award ceremony. He watches it all.

This kid...

He types in the name 'Katsuki Bakugou.'

The articles don't depict him as a little fifteen-year-old. They don't talk about him like he's a child at all. The internet is filled with cautionary tales and labels that peg the kid as dangerous and villainous and it contrasts so starkly with the video paused beside him that it leaves him feeling like he's suffering from whiplash.

The hoodie.

The sunglasses.

Ducking his head.

Hiding.

This was not the first time something like this had happened. Sakane drums his fingers on his desk as he comes to this realization. A strong kid like that, breaking down in the middle of the street? No. It wasn't the first time by a long shot.

Cautionary tale indeed.

He has a lot to think about and a kid out there who clearly needs help. First things first though, his granddaughter deserves an apology and the ability to tell an old fart like him 'I told you so.'

His Fault

Chapter Summary

Katsuki realizes that one of the people harassing him has dangerous intentions

Chapter 4: His Fault

His classmates are going to the mall this weekend to prepare for the camping trip. Katsuki rebuffed Kirishima's offer and Horn's whining. There's no way he wants to deal with his classmates and whatever potential disaster him being seen in public will cause. The pool was one thing, as it was just them, even I-island had a sense of safeness to it because the number of people who knew who Katsuki Bakugou was had a limitation. Open public space was a whole other ball game though and the idea of any of those losers getting dragged into the shitshow that was Katsuki life left him feeling nervous and antsy.

He didn't get nervous.

He didn't get antsy.

That wasn't the type of shit Katsuki had ever worried about before and there was a small part of him that worried that he was falling into the stereotypical teenage bullshit he despised so much and worked so hard to avoid. Worrying about impressing people and what his classmates thought, about embarrassing himself or that romance dumb shit had never crossed his mind before and there was a need, a desire to crush it under his heel.

Caring about what the squad thought and how they viewed him was a sure-fire way to getting distracted from his goals. If he allowed himself that then whose to say he wouldn't slip up and say yes to hanging out instead of studying? That he'd allow himself to be dragged into one of their dumbass stunts instead of training? It was disgusting. What separated him from the extras and losers was Katsuki's own work ethic and skills. Socializing was for the weak. If you were strong, you fought for that strength, you dedicated yourself to your goal. You chose the harder path instead of doing the fun shit.

It left him open too, vulnerable in a way that made him feel

uncomfortable. If he cared about what they thought then that meant at some point when the inevitable happened and they left or got angry and cut ties well... That just left him with the same goals but weaker for it.

He'd gotten too close to them.

He knew he had.

It left his skin feeling like Pikachu had sparked him when they were around. Both drawn to them and repulsed at the same time. He needed to cut that shit out before he ended up with something worse.

Katsuki grabbed the mail, separating the six or seven letters addressed to him from his parents, stuffing them in his bag before he ever opens up the door. He closes it with his foot, a habit he's been yelled at for a million times, but when you're screamed at for breathing it stops mattering what you do or how you act.

He shoves their mail into their little box that's piled high with stuff that probably should have been opened weeks ago, but Katsuki doesn't question how they run their house and the lights haven't been turned off, so he supposes it's not important.

When he leaves early Monday morning with his backpack, his dad has already left for the office. His mother the only one in the house. She's carefully taking her hair out of the treatment oils to keep it pliant and healthy for her assistant when she goes into the modeling agency. Her eyes watch him as he tucks a clean set of shirts into the back, slinging it over his shoulder. She doesn't say a word until he's at the door.

"Don't ruin the trip for everyone else, Katsuki, try your best not to be yourself," the hag called to him as he closes the door.

"Love you too," he muttered under his breath.

Katsuki has to wonder if his classmates know.

He knows Deku is obsessed with Hero Forums. He sees Horns and Sparks on social media all the time. His classmates are always talking about the apps they are using and the platforms they have and there's an itch in the back of his mind if they've seen his name cross their screens. How could they not know?

It doesn't matter.

He doesn't care.

Let them think what they want. Let them laugh behind his back. Snicker at his expense. It was fine because at the end of the day, he could bench press any of these losers, outside of maybe Kirishima or Sato. He's consistently at the top in their sparring and academics. They can't laugh too loud while he's kicking their asses.

The small voice in his head still worries. He wonders what they think when they see those articles or pictures. If it changes how they view him. Not that their view of him is fucking great to begin with. It's not like Katsuki's personality is sunshine and rainbows, but it still sends a nasty feeling along his spine to know that they might think the same thing as those articles.

That he was destined to be a Villain.

That he was dangerous and would end up hurting them.

It's hard to breathe.

His uniform feels tight on him and within five minutes of being on the platform waiting for the others, he's already lost his tie, much to Four-eyes dismay. The class representative tried to lecture him, but Katsuki had stuck his earbuds in and walked away, causing the much taller boy to sputter and do that weird arm movement thing. He's still talking to, mouth moving up and down in words Katsuki can't hear but can imagine just fine.

Four-eyes doesn't seem the type to cruise the internet for hero articles. If it's not in an instruction handbook or not pointed out to him by one of his classmates, he probably considers that stuff to be nothing but gossip columns and beneath him.

Much to Katsuki's chagrin, the thought pleases him, and he spends too long analyzing what level of patheticness that falls under.

All the other losers haven't shown up yet even though the forms all said to be here half an hour early. After Four-eyes has settled down, he turns to one of his books, turning the pages in a... stern (?) fashion. Can someone turn pages in a stern fashion? Iida does. There's an oddly companionable peace between them though as Katsuki pulls out his own book on English to go over verbal tenses again. He spots Four-eyes glancing at him approvingly, though he tries to keep it subtle, the

taller speed demon turns his head almost fully towards Katsuki and tilts his head in such a way that he knows he's trying to spot what Katsuki is reading.

Just because he can, cause he's a spiteful bitch, Katsuki draws a penis in the margin of the textbook Iida can see. He watches in satisfaction as Four-eyes face goes red and he looks like he's going to open his mouth to lecture Katsuki only to pause as he realizes that means admitting he was spying on the other. Katsuki looks up, raising his eyebrows in a dare. Iida seems to have caught on to the fact that Katsuki had done it on purpose to prove a point.

The square jaw closes with a snap, lips pressing into a thin line. Four-eyes nods sharply, showing that he understands the silent reprimand. He looks forward, his attention going back to his own textbook.

A tiny, practically none existent smile twitches at Katsuki's lips as he goes back to his own, erasing the drawing before any of the idiot squad can come and cause a scene about it. Because they will if they miraculously show up on time to see.

The bus hasn't arrived either though so it's not like he can be too annoyed with them when he's the one standing around like an idiot and nowhere to go.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

His phone is definitely going to die before they ever make it to camp though.

With a resigned air, he searches for an outlet and plugs it in, turning off his vibrate so that his classmates don't get weirded out or nosy about the constant texts pinging like some demonic possession instead of a phone. Normally he listens to his music on the device, that way he gets recs for new stuff, but with all that's been going on, he's been forced to bring out his old iPod, listening to his older limited stuff.

The battery dying all the time kind of puts a damper on how he can use his phone. It's not like he had a line of people needing to get ahold of him (or wanting to). His old man prefers face to face and only texts in case of extreme circumstances. His mom... deserved to be ignored right now.

Even if Katsuki had prioritized their phone numbers, it was still impossible to tell when a beep meant one of the squad or one of the numerous harassment messages, so he checked it maybe every five

hours or so just to see if there was any blue. More often than not to find he'd missed out on an entire conversation between the group that had ended hours ago. Rare was the moment when his check-in coincided with the group actually being in the middle of a group chat.

Kirishima and the others had all accepted that Katsuki wasn't a 'phone person' and declared him an old man for his lack of technical savviness. It wasn't true, but he'd let them believe whatever they wanted if that meant they never learned the truth. The first time Deku had overheard the squad saying such things, his head had swiveled around like a horror movie creature to look at Katsuki as if he could find the answers to such blatant lies if he just stared creepily enough.

"Morning, Kacchan..." a hesitant, familiar voice says to his left.

Katsuki feels his eye twitch.

Speak of the Devil.

Deku shuffles from side to side as if he has to pee and Katsuki ignores him, knowing without looking up that the shitty nerd will hover near him until more people show up. He'd never say it out loud, but the feel of his presence is actually nice for once. It feels normal. Deku might just be an obsessed stalker who over analyzes everything and has a *comment* for everything Katsuki does, but Deku's mild form of harassment isn't ever intentionally malicious in nature and that's a nice change of pace from what's been happening lately.

His constant attempts at one upping Katsuki, stealing his moves, and the way he pokes fun at the things Katsuki does, looking down on him, is like clockwork. Most of his other actions are harmless if annoying. They're practically family, as much as he hates to make that comparison, and if anyone tries anything here at the bus station then Deku's morally upright ass will be on it like a bloodhound from hell.

It's not enough to make him relax while their standing out in the open like this, but it is enough that he doesn't feel the need to keep looking up every sentence or so like a crazy paranoid poster child.

Deku is the third one here. Which meant that the Icyhot bastard and ponytail would be wandering in at some point in the next few minutes. The top five students. The extras in the class could at least *attempt* to surprise him with a little less lackluster effort.

If fucking Pikachu was last, he utterly gives up on all of them.

They trickle in.

Katsuki couldn't have predicted things better if he had Nighteye's quirk. Ponytail arrived in a god damn limousine, stepping out like it was the most natural thing in the world and thanking her chauffeur in a sweet, honey-coated voice that made Katsuki roll his eyes so hard it actually hurt. The bus arrived minutes later, the top half of the class gathering just in the nick of time. He took a seat next to Birdbrain, folding his arms and leaning back to close his eyes.

None of the dimwits that liked to force themselves upon Katsuki had arrived yet. They'd probably gathered in one spot so that they could bombard the bus just before it took off. None of them had a great attention span and being trapped on a bus for several hours was more than likely being moaned and bitched about at this very moment at a convenience store where the idiots were buying last-minute junk food.

Pikachu arrives with Mina, the two of them brandishing drinks as they pile in and take the seats at the front of the bus. Last in the class rankings. Last to show up. Fucking hell. He's going to drag both their miserable asses through an obstacle course until it's so fucking ingrained in their brains that they could do it in their sleep. Teach them what it really means to have a little discipline in their lives. To work instead of half-assing everything. Yaoyorozu was a miracle worker to have gotten these two idiots to pass the written portion of the exams. God damn.

He'd beat into them what it meant to be Plus Fucking Ultra.

Katsuki must have fallen asleep. Though he doesn't know how. His classmates are being loud as fuck. There's no other explanation for the fact that a few seconds ago there had been skyscrapers and now forest zooms past him. His iPod has died and he tucks it into his bag and looks around, stretching out his limbs and hearing things pop and crack as he moves out of his cramped slump.

Ashido notices his movement and tilts her bag of skittles his way. He takes a few orange ones, ignoring her amused look as he makes sure not to accidentally grab any of the other flavors. He's not much for sweets, but orange flavors starburst or skittles are his favorite. Obviously, it's a waste to buy the bags for himself when he's doesn't

like the other flavors so he rarely ever gets them.

The bus hits a rock and Ashido is thrown forward a bit, a few skittles flying out and smacking Icyhot in the face, who for some reason is sitting in the aisle. That cheers him up immensely even as Horns starts to apologize.

Wait...

“Weren’t you up front before?” Katsuki asks.

Ashido’s attention is brought back to him and she grins, giving him a peace sign.

“Hagakure wanted to sit with Koda so she could ask him what to do about her sick cat, so I volunteered to sit next to this handsome man,” she stuck her thumb in Shoji’s direction, Tentacles jerked in startlement, a tinge of red showing right above his mask. A mouth formed and moved towards them, large teeth opening up.

“Thanks.”

Ashido beamed.

“Okay, why is the Icyhot bastard in the aisle?” Katsuki asked.

“Looking like a fucking moron,” he added, because it was clear the guy could hear him. He could practically see the heterochromatic eye twitch.

“You really *don’t* pay any attention to anything, do you?” Ashido asked, looking bemused.

Why did that sound so... Oh. Sato had accused him of the same thing at the Sport’s Festival when he couldn’t recall his classmate’s names.

“Todoroki moved over for Aoyama.”

“But...” he glanced behind him to see the full row of empty back seats. “Why...”

“Sometimes the company is worth the inconvenience,” Ashido answered, winking at him.

Right.

Because that made sense.

The bus came to a stop. Katsuki looked outside, spotting a beautiful view overlooking a cliff. His classmates jumbled about to get off the bus as fast as possible. He followed more calmly, staying near the bus.

A slight shove on the shoulder had him curling his lips and turning around only to see Aizawa there, tilting his head towards the other students were a group of odd looking heroes stood in coordinating costumes.

Katsuki sighed heavily but walked forward.

He should of fucking known.

Aizawa was a traitorous manipulative cock sucking bastard! Fucking piece of shit shoving him towards all the other dumbasses like a herd of sheep just so he could be in better range to be thrown off a god damn cliff.

He should know by now not to trust adults!

Fucking hell, every part of his body aches. What kind of training in that? How to be a shitty adult?! How to destroy what little trust they have in their miserable teachers half assed orders?!

“How do you have the excess energy to be angry?” Sero muttered as he crawled out of the forest beside him.

“Spite,” Katsuki muttered.

“I think all my toenails are broken,” Ashido hissed as she stumbled over a rock.

“I think that last monster had its own zip code,” Kirishima complained.

“Shower. Foooooood. Sleep,” Kaminari mumbled. “No more talk.”

Katsuki could get behind that.

He...

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Katsuki glanced at the screen as it popped up, fully intending to

ignore it like he had all the others these last few weeks, freezing as he caught a glimpse of what was being sent to him. He tried to be subtle, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention to him before pressing on the most recent message sent.

It was an image of him waiting for the bus today. His school uniform with no tie, as usual, his backpack slung over his shoulder. The back of Iida's head could be seen, looking towards the road. It was just the two of them though, before Deku arrived.

See you soon.

What the actual fuck?! Katsuki breathed deeply through his nose as he felt a shiver go down his spine. What crazy lunatic had sent him this? Katsuki stared down at the image in trepidation.

They couldn't be serious.

Unless... it was one of the four heroes here? At camp? Or was it just something to unnerve him, put him on guard. It wasn't as if this was the first picture of himself he'd ever received. The one of him on his way to school came to mind, the words that had left him unnerved and paranoid for weeks- **We see you.**

Was this the same person?

There was no freaking way they would come all the way out here though. No way. Besides... there were six Pro-heroes here. There were forty heroes in training. One obsessive, pissed off person wasn't going to get anywhere near here.

They'd never done anything before now so why would they wait until Katsuki was literally surrounded by heroes? Why not target him when he was alone?

Pfft.

Target.

What was he thinking? Overdramatizing like always. It was just a text. Sure, from one of his creepy, take pictures of him from a distance, stalkers, but these were just people upset over the Sport's Festival. Letters and phone messages was the worst...

He thinks of Haji and the ice cream thrown at him. We'll, not the worst, but no one had hit him. No one had attacked him. Unpleasant,

sure, but threats and nasty insults was all it really amounted too.

Still...

Should he tell someone?

A pit opens up in his chest at the thought. They'd want to know everything. About the other pictures sent. The drawings. The phone calls. The texts. The letters. The harassment on the streets. Katsuki seizes up at the thought. It feels like he's having his air taken from him. He clutches at his chest.

No.

Nothing came of the other photo of him. Who knows... Katsuki has refused to look at most of his incoming messages, maybe there were more. The thought, far from making him feel better, just makes him feel worse. He realizes with a sinking feeling that there probably are.

His phone remains silent.

Almost as if it's taunting him.

Should he look? If this bastard had seen him at other places... its not like this is the first time he's thought of the possibility. He'd spent the first week after the first photo losing his fucking shit every time someone even looked at him wrong on his way home. Triple checking the doors and windows were locked, even moving the kitchen's wine cabinet over so that it stood in front of the sliding glass door. Much to his mom's irritation.

He lost a lot of sleep over it.

Which is why he'd been avoiding looking at his phone messages. Because the sleep deprivation had been horrible. But its not like he's going to be able to sleep after seeing this. Katsuki stands up, moving away from everyone else rolling out their sleeping bags and trudges towards the bathroom.

His breath isn't coming out right. It's stuttering in his chest like there's something wet in his throat. He swallows but it does nothing.

He closes one of the stall doors too hard and sits on the tank lid.

He clicks on the messages and begins scrolling through them carefully.

Does Best Jeanist know he took in an up and coming Villain?

Who are you trying to fool? Everyone knows what a vial child you are.

Late getting home. Did you fuck up again and get detention? The teachers know what a screw up you are.

Katsuki pauses and looks at the date on that one. He eyes linger blankly there, frowning as he tries to recall if he'd been home late from school. He often stayed and worked in the gym after class on days when there was no hero training, sometimes even then. He notes it, but goes on.

I bet you don't have any friends. A nasty piece of work like you.

You've got some nerve pretending your hero material.

I bet you have the biggest...

Katsuki looked away, feeling sick as he moved further down. Some people had sent him large paragraphs of lectures, links, threats, insults. Some were short or even single words: **Shame on you. Bully. Go shoot yourself. Villain.**

He wasn't finding anymore pictures of himself though. Most of the stuff here were generic insults and vague descriptions of what could be found on google. Even the threats were more 'you'll pay one day for having such a shitty attitude' rather than 'we're outside your house waiting for you to come out' type.

You're very lonely, aren't you?

Katsuki stopped, looking at the date set for yesterday. Yet another unlisted number. But this one had... fuck. It had 42 messages down the line all within a few hours time span. He clicked on the number, feeling a bit numb as he saw the messages.

He flicks the screen downwards, going up to the first one.

Saw you leaving your home. You didn't look well, sweetie.

He doesn't quite believe it at first. As he scrolls down the messages though, they list details. Little things he'd done on his way to school. On his way back. The jog he'd taken in the early evening. The color of his favorite water container he'd taken to carrying with him since the Haji incident, maroon with black skulls along the bottom. His brand new white shoes.

I'm your friend, Katsuki.

You can call me Big Sis Magne.

Enjoy your training trip!

Katsuki vomited into the toilet in front of him.

Fuck.

Shit.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He should call his parents. He should warn them. He should tell them to leave the house. He should...

She was only interested in him, right?

Katsuki takes deep gulps of air. There still feels like there's too little of it, like his lungs aren't quite expanding. He leans against the stall as he tries to make the world not tilt so badly. So some psycho lady is following him around and thinks she's his friend.

Katsuki clutches at his chest, his fingers digging into soft cloth. Cotton. It's cotton. The phone in his left hand is hot from overuse, but smooth. There's a crack in the corner. The stall he's leaning against feels gross in the way only having too many people in the middle of a forest can. Like it's never had a good scrub and it's the only bathroom in a million miles. There's a smell, not bad, of the hot spring the window up top opens up to. Too much water in the air. A chemical, not chlorine, but bleachy smelling.

His breathing evens out.

Katsuki blinks hard and darkens the screen so the words on his phone aren't glaring up at him. Ground technique. He doesn't quite remember where he read it, but it had helped in smaller moments of panic since the Sludge incident. It had never been this bad though.

He needs to tell someone.

He's going to tell someone.

He is.

Just... he's safe here. At this training facility in the middle of nowhere

surrounded by villains. Clearly this stalker doesn't give a rat's ass about his parents and knows he's at the training grounds. They're clearly waiting until he gets back for whatever the fuck that little comment meant.

If it's even the same person.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

No. Don't panic. Deep breaths. The room is warm. A little too warm. Cause of the hot springs. Right. There's tile beneath his bare feet. Bare because he was getting ready to sleep.

Katsuki laughs a little hysterically.

He's wired now. Adrenaline like he's on the stage of the Sport's Arena again. He's not gonna sleep a fucking wink tonight.

With shaking fingers, he calls his dad.

"Well hello there, already missing your old man?" Masaru says questioningly. He knows Katsuki's not the type. He knows something's wrong. "Huh? Yeah. Give me just one minute." He hears him tell someone else. "Sorry, about to get on the plane," his dad sounds genuinely apologetic.

"You're... going out of town?" Katsuki croaks.

"Yes. Katsuki, what's wrong? This isn't like you. Do you need me to come get you? I can. I absolutely can."

"No!" Katsuki says hurriedly. "No! That's good. When are you getting back?"

"Hm... a few days after you, I think. We left a note and some cash on the kitchen counter for you when you get back. Kat, what's wrong?"

"It's..."

He's about to say nothing, but he knows that's not right.

At this point, it could put them in danger.

He can no longer keep quiet.

“It’s... there’s something I need to talk to you about when you get back. It’s important.”

“Yes, yes, just... one more moment, I’m sorry, but I this can’t wait. I understand...”

“Dad,” Katsuki croaked. “It can wait. Get on the plane, okay?”

There’s a pause.

“I can miss this flight, Katsuki, I... you’re more important to me than a business trip. Do you need me to come get you?”

“No. No, it’s not about what’s happening at camp. I just... when you get back, I need to tell you something, okay?”

“Alright,” his dad says uncertainly. “Alright. If you change your mind, you tell me, and I’ll hop on a flight back. I love you.”

“Love you,” Katsuki whispers back, before hitting end, or his dad really will leave the airport.

Even the tiles are lukewarm. There a sea green. Bland. Boring.

Katsuki breathes.

Okay. Alright. His parents aren’t at the house. Katsuki’s not at the house. The world isn’t coming to an end. No one is in immediate danger. He needs to stop freaking the fuck out before someone comes in here and makes a big deal out of this.

He’s fine.

He’s safe.

The person, this woman, can’t get him.

No one can get him here.

His breathing finally evens out. The shaking stops. He feels oddly cold even though everything around him is too warm. His hands are clammy.

Think.

Okay.

What would happen if Katsuki told Aizawa right now he had a stalker that was turning from vague harassment to actually threatening? He'd probably say they'd deal with it when they got back to the school. Call in a police officer to talk to Katsuki. Aizawa would probably make a call to his parents tonight. Both of them would insist on coming back even though plane tickets are expensive and Katsuki won't even be home. To a house where Katsuki wouldn't be there to do anything if this stalker tried something.

So...

Best option is to wait to the end of the trip then. That way Aizawa wouldn't be obligated to call them until they'd finished up their business stuff. Can't report what he doesn't know. This way police would be involved before anyone actually got home, but Katsuki would make it back before his parents ensuring no one could hurt them without Katsuki there to stop them.

Right.

That sounded legit.

Despite his own assurances, Katsuki spends the whole night curled up and staring at the ceiling until light begins to filter through the high windows. Until his eyes burn and his muscles clench in pain from being so stiff for hours, until his body feels more like led than flesh and bone, his head full of cotton.

He doesn't move until the others start moving. When light is beginning to pour through the high windows. They stretch and bitch and moan and pop joints as they gather themselves into some version of wakefulness that Katsuki knows he won't be experiencing today.

There's a tiny voice that says he should tell Aizawa. That it's okay to be a little weak. The words 'I'm scared' sitting like an infection in the back of his throat and 'I don't know what to do about it.'

He doesn't like waiting around.

He's always felt the need to fix a problem when he sees it, but with this, the solution seems like it will cause a domino effect of awful shit to happen. Katsuki has been dealing with this by himself and its sucked, but no one else has been affected. As long as no one else was affected, he could pretend it wasn't a problem.

Blasting it open like this though makes it feel like he's been complacent. Like he didn't try hard enough before it got so bad. Like it's his fault his parents might be in danger when they come back from their trip.

"Alright! Look alive, we're going to be training your quirks until you drop!" Aizawa roars.

Holy fucking shit balls.

He's screwed.

His phone sits innocently on top of his bag, like it doesn't know what it fucking did to him. Katsuki aggressively stuffs it inside his backpack so he doesn't have to look at it as he gets ready.

It's utter hell.

Normally he enjoys the burn of his muscles and the exertion of training, but this is utter crap. A drain you have to clean after flaming shit has been stuffed into it with a plunger. Reeking and burning and gross.

There have been black dots clawing at the edge of his consciousness for the better part of the day and a woozy feeling in his limbs and head threatening to faceplant him. He barely eats because he's too tired, falling asleep with his arms folded on the dinner table.

"You with us man?" Sero's voice floats into his head, fingers digging into his shoulder and shaking him roughly. The voice sounds amused, but when he looks, his long-limbed friend looks concerned.

"Fii-ne," the word comes out slurred, feels like it's spoken around syrup.

The frown deepens.

"Maybe you should head to bed instead of doing the 'Courage challenge,'" Sero suggests quietly.

"I-I'm not fuckin' weak. 'Can han-dle it,'" Katsuki slurs more. Sitting up to prove a point and clenching the table hard to keep himself upright. He sends a glare the taller boy's way.

Sero holds up his hands in surrender, but his normally too big horse smile is turned downwards.

“Okay. Not weak. Got it.”

“Damn st-straight!”

Katsuki chugs a bottle of water, from his maroon water bottle with the skulls. The sight of the water bottle causes his heart to skip a beat and without thinking he drops it. It hits the floor and rolls towards his white shoes. The ones he’d bought and the ones the chick had described to a T. Right down to the brand.

He’d been avoiding thinking about it all day, but now the photos and the words slam into him like a hellhound rising from the bowels of the earth to clinch its jaw around his throat. He should have brought different shoes.

“...ugou? Kinda scary me here, buddy.”

Katsuki jerks away from the touch on his arm, looking up to find Sero too close.

“Yeeeeaaaaah,” Sero drawls out. “I really think you should take a nap, at least.”

“Fuck off.”

He grabs the bottle and marches away. He knows Sero says something, but he can’t hear it. He lines up with the others, standing sluggishly. Aizawa comes and wraps his whole squad of failures up to take for extra lessons. Which leaves him alone with the rest of the class. Suddenly he regrets not taking Sero up on the idea. He doesn’t really want to do this alone with the more uptight assholes in the class.

And Deku.

Maybe he’ll get lucky though and be paired with Tokoyami or Koda or Shoji. Yeah. This could be okay. This would be...

Or he could be paired off with the fucking candy cane. Great. Fucking fantastic. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Who cared about a test of courage anyways... not him. He could... the bell went off. Someone pushed him towards the forest. Katsuki scowled as he looked around at the innocent looking faces of his classmates. His eyes narrow on round face specifically whose smiling a little too wide beside a nervous

looking Deku and a calm as ever Tsu.

Whatever.

It's fine.

It's all fine.

He's fine.

He's fucking dandy.

He is NOT fucking dandy.

“We have discovered one of the villain’s targets! It is one of the student’s- Kacchan!”

It's like the Sludge Villain has him in his hold again. Only this time it's like Katsuki purposefully opened the bottle and dumped him out, its like he held out his arms to embrace the fucker. This time bad things aren't happening because he's in the wrong place at the wrong time, it's not because he idly kicked a stray bottle.

This is his fault.

Katsuki caused this.

It's his fucking fault!

The forest is burning with a blue flame and gas is pouring in from all sides. Students are hurt. Maybe dead. His teachers... Deku... his friends...

We see you.

Enjoy your training trip!

See you soon.

Much of what happens next feels like it's happening to someone else.

He knows he loses it a little bit. Knows that invasion in his head is too much, knows he yells at them for it.

“Stop making so much noise in my head!”

He's knows after that moment there is nothing but dodging and fighting. It's oddly hard to concentrate. His breathing feels constricted. There's a class 1B kid on Todoroki's back. Deku is a fucking mess, which, why is he fucking surprised? Ururaka and Shoji are covered in blood. Tokoyami has lost all control of his quirk.

And it's all his fault.

That thought keeps ramming itself down his throat, choking him and it takes everything in his power not to scream and scream and scream and never stop screaming. Because he's fucked up in a way that cannot be undone. And all the evidence of that is sitting on his phone back at camp and underneath his bed in deceptive looking paper folds.

If anyone dies tonight that's on him.

That's on...

Something wraps around him.

He can't move. He can't scream. He's in the forest one moment and somewhere else the next. There's nothing but crystal around him. Under his feet. Above his head. At his fingertips and feet. He can hear battle roaring in his ears for a few long minutes, the sound of an obnoxious taunting voice and then...

And then Deku is in front of him, facing him, where before Katsuki had been looking at the back of Todoroki's stupid candy cane head. Large green eyes so wide and so hurt set in a face that looks even more fucked up then it had not even a few moments ago.

There's a large hand around Katsuki's throat pulling him backwards and he feels paralyzed still. Stiff. Like his body is made of stone. Had he been turned to stone? Did he get hit with some kind of Medusa quirk?

And as absolutely trashed as Deku's body is, he can see the shitty nerd still moving, forcing his body to stand and work past its obvious limits. He can hear the blasted idiot screaming his name, heading directly toward him. Trying to reach him even as he's being sucked into this black gaping portal.

"Don't come, Deku," he warns.

It's the last words he's able to croak out before darkness takes him.

Sitting Duck

Chapter Summary

Trapped in a chair leads to an unfortunate, large amount of time to think as he's visited by various members of the League of Bastards and pisses most of them off

Chapter 5: Sitting Duck

When Katsuki was eight, there was a duck with one leg and a broken wing that lived in the pond near his house. He and Deku had a silent agreement to always leave bread by a small rock on the other side where it slept because it couldn't walk around like the other ducks could. The duck couldn't get to the place where people tended to give bread crumbs so it would honk unhappily on the other side of the large rock dam built to stop the park from flooding.

It wasn't a big deal.

Just a little thing they did.

Katsuki would sit in the tree branch several feet above the ground while Deku sat on the rock and together they'd watch the poor thing climb out of the water and sort of do a hopping rolling motion to the bread. He'd nibble on it and honk at them and nibble at it some more.

One day though the bird wasn't there.

Even at eight, they'd sort of known why. Deku cried. Like he always did whenever something sad happened. Katsuki yelled at him. Again. Like always. Standing angrily by his tree with folded arms.

Because while there was not a body, there was an awful lot of feathers around the spot the bird slept. Too many to be natural in any way. Maybe some of their classmates might not have understood but Katsuki did and Deku did. The shitty nerd might be a little naïve, but that didn't make him fucking dumb. Deku was sharp and observant. He picked up on stuff as quick as Katsuki did.

The difference between them was that Katsuki had natural instincts.

He had reflexes while Deku tended to go too far with his analysis. He spent too much time thinking about stuff and not enough reacting and doing.

So they both knew the duck was dead.

Deku stayed and cried and Katsuki went off to cool down, leaping into the forest near their homes and climbing into places he shouldn't have been climbing. So it was that Deku sat and thought about the poor duck that probably got eaten and imagined what might have happened and Katsuki... we'll, Katsuki stumbled upon what actually happened to the poor duck that definitely got eaten.

Breathing hard and heavy, he'd blasted his way up a bit of a rocky trail, feet sliding along sheer stone and going a little too close to the cliff side before he saw it. He wasn't sure what kind of bird it was. Large silver and black wings and half the size of Katsuki himself. A cliff about thirty feet above, with twigs and shit, building what looked like the largest nest Katsuki had ever seen. With white familiar feathers poking out of the nest all over the place. A few white feathers speckled in blood sat at the bottom of the cliff where Katsuki stood.

The falcon or eagle or whatever it was had a bone in its mouth.

He never told Deku about it.

As he jerked violently back into the world, feeling his wrists bound my metal and his body held in place by leather straps, howling in anger as he wrenched and bucked against his chair like prison, Katsuki was forced to acknowledge one thing.

He was the fucking duck.

When he finally tired himself out with thrashing, wrists raw and red, chest rubbed by leather to the point of a rash, lets number from the inability to move... he finally looked around the room. It was bleak with no windows. Bricks and pipes lining the walls with a wooden bar and bottles sticking out of the wall. The bottles didn't have any dust on them. Perhaps a bit lingering in the corners here or there, but the bar and supplies were relatively spotless.

Which meant they were used often. The bar wasn't just for looks then. This also meant that if there was supply being used... so there had to be demand. Customers. Which meant they were probably not in the middle of fucking nowhere.

No tables or chairs though outside of the barstools.

Recently cleared out, possibly. There were no marks on the floor though and little room for them. Nothing to indicate that there *had* been tables here. So a shady bar with six stools and no tables or chairs. Which meant that the customers weren't there to see each other.

They were there to see the Bartender.

So the Bartender was the deal maker then. Probably not the boss man, but likely a middle man.

Katsuki leaned back in the chair only to gag. Flinching away from the leather at his back as the smell of iron hit his nose. Blood. The chair felt clean though, looked clean, which meant that whoever had been tied to this thing before him had been there awhile. Or the body had, at any rate.

Secondhand torture device. Gross. He shuddered as he tried not to let the panic at that thought consume him. Everything felt heavy which means he was either drugged or it hadn't been that long since they'd tied him here and he was still suffering from sleep deprivation from yesterday.

Not like there was a clock anywhere.

With no windows, there was no way to tell the time either. His eyes slide over to the two doors. One bolted and locked and the other a bright purple curtain going into what looked like a storage room for bar supplies.

Katsuki brings his legs up, the only free limbs he has at the moment, and sits awkward Indian style with his legs against the side of the chair, more to just get them in a different position. He's drowsy, bone-tired, but between the adrenaline still pumping through him screaming 'danger' 'danger' 'danger' and the discomfort of the chair he's been forcefully pinned into, there's no fucking way he's actually going to sleep at all.

Every creak makes him startle like a crack of thunder going off in his ear. Every floorboard groaning above him sounds like a gunshot going off. He strains his less than stellar hearing, but only the restless old building's bones make noise as it slowly grinds against itself. No rustling of people. No whispers. No movement.

They can't have left him alone here.

But for all intents and purposes, it sure as hell feels like it. Even the old television set, looking like it popped out of the last centuries anus, is off and silent.

As the minutes' tick by a new problem arose.

He has to piss.

“God fucking damn it.”

The leather under his arms chaffs terribly, the skin there rubbed raw, coming off in parts like a rug burn. He knows it's because this chair was not designed for a kid. It still holds him down tightly, doing its job, but it's clear it was designed for a full-grown adult. The metal piece that clips over his chest is far too high and Katsuki thinks that it's probably supposed to sit over his stomach. The straps over his thighs are pulled as tight as they can go, but Katsuki still has the ability to move them a bit.

He wonders who it was who put him in this thing and if they'd noticed the same problem. If any of these fuckers were bothered that they'd kidnapped a kid. Course, as he thinks of that, he knows that no one has ever thought of Katsuki as that.

No one has referred to him as a kid in a long time.

Not in the letters.

Not in the texts.

Not by heroes or his teachers.

Not by anyone at the Sport's Festival.

Not during the Sludge Incident.

Not by his mom.

No.

The person who put him in this chair probably hadn't noticed at all.

There are twenty-three rows of bricks horizontal and thirteen vertical. What was the white cement stuff they used in bricking? Whatever. Doesn't matter. It spreads upwards to a cherry wood roof that looks like it would be easy to blast through if he could just get his hands free. It doesn't match the flooring and that bothers the fuck out of him. Not that it's too noticeable. The floor looks oak. Sturdy.

Fuck.

It's not working.

Every distraction technique he knows isn't pulling his attention away from the fact that his lower half feels like its burning and the dread of the thought that he's probably going to piss himself soon.

"Oi! Oi! Oi! Unless you fuckers want to clean up sewage like the rat-faced motherfuckers you are, I'd get your asses in here you two-bit bastards!" He screamed.

Again.

There's no sound of footsteps though.

It's been hours.

Harass him. Kidnap him. What for? Just to abandon him in this chair in a seedy bar. Maybe they went out to grab shit and got their asses caught and the police are interrogating them about Katsuki's location and they'll show up just when he pisses on the floor. Classy. And also just the sort of shit luck Katsuki's found he can count on.

A little humiliation.

A lot of trauma.

A touch of indignation.

Deku coming out as the hero even though all he ever accomplishes is breaking his bones or endangering his life...

He hopes everyone else made it out okay.

Katsuki's head tilts to the side as he tries to blink away the exhaustion he feels. Round and round his thoughts go always spinning like a car crash into that thought. His fault. If he'd just fucking told Aizawa...

Shoji's missing hand.

Tokoyami losing control.

The unconscious 1B student.

The blood dripping from Tsu and Uraraka.

Deku...

See you soon.

Hot tears touch the corner of his eyes and fuck... he can't reach up to wipe them away. He tilts his head back and blinks hard to force them to slide down his face, wiping his cheeks against his shoulder as best he could.

It's not like anyone is here to see him but...

He can't stand the idea of crying in this place. All alone like some fucking B-list nobody waiting to die.

A crash sounds below.

Katsuki jerks, cursing as he almost pisses himself from the sudden onslaught of yelling that startles him awake. The sound of what must be a fucking elephant slamming into every possible surface rocks the hallway outside and Katsuki swallows hard as he tries to keep the panic at bay. Trapped between adrenaline and that space where your so exhausted you're woozy.

The door slams open with a 'bang!'

"HELLO there Explosion kid!! *Who the hell are you?*" Black jumpsuit. The crazy one who moves from one type of voice to another. He swings into the room like a bat out of hell and stands with hands on his hips, white slotted eyes staring down at him. "Little boy, little boy, let me in! *I've come to take you away, ha, ha!*"

"Listen here you walking personality disorder, I need to piss," Katsuki growls, putting as much venom into his voice as possible.

"RUDE! *He's got you pegged!*" The man pulls out a black cloth. "It's why I came. Got to make sure you're taking care of. *I voted we cut off your head!*"

A blindfold.

The hands that wrap the black cloth around him is extraordinarily

gentle one second before turning rough, pulling at his hair to force him into the position needed to tie it off, before letting go of him as if burned, petting his head as if it apology. Fucking hell. His captor was Smeagol. He was so screwed. He didn't even have a ring to distract the bastard with.

"Don't try again or I'll have to break your arm. No way! Just a little love tap! We like the kid! Right?! A real firecracker! I don't like him at all. Don't put words in my mouth."

The world went dark.

Hands unlatch the leather straps. Not the quirk restraint though. The metal clamps remain firmly in place as he's manhandled out of the chair and shoved through the metal door. The sudden blood rushing into his legs causes him to stumble. He hits the door frame. A moment later those same gloved hands steady him, holding him by his neck to steer him in the right direction, but in a much softer manner than before.

Gollum and Smeagol, alright.

Katsuki's shoved through another door at the end of the hall. Ten paces from the other room. Wood flooring that creaked. Had there been a breeze? Or did he just imagine that?

"There's a hole in the floor. *Best of luck!* That's gonna suck for you but we can't afford to bring you to the nice bathroom."

A door shut.

A lock clicked into place.

Katsuki cursed as he felt around the tiny rough walls with his elbows. Three feet by maybe two? His feet snagged on... yeah, a hole. He was in some sort of shower, if he had to guess. His hands still very much trapped in metal. Fully clothed. The extent of his dilemma hit him like a sledgehammer.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Katsuki snarled at the closed door.

Muffled snickering was his reply.

Even blindfolded, quirk restrained, hands locked in heavy metal...

Katsuki tried to fight back- after he'd figured his shit out. It had gone about as well as expected, but he'd at least pulled a pissed off, an indignant howl of pain from the bastard. He'd definitely connected his metal cuffs with *something*.

As it turned out, both Smeagol and Gollum had the ability to be rough assholes when hurt. He'd found himself thrown in the chair with the restraints even tighter than before. Leather straps even keeping his thighs pinned down this time.

“That’s what you get for trying to be nice. *I’m sorry!* You should be.”

He doesn’t think any of that had been talking to Katsuki. The chair is kicked lightly on the man’s way out. The black spots in the corner of his eyes is even more prevalent and he closes them for just a moment, head tilting towards his shoulder...

Just for a...

“Oh sweetie, you are an absolute mess.”

Katsuki jolted awake, throwing himself against the back of the chair as he *felt* someone hovering right in front of him. His wrists twinge in pain as he inadvertently yanked them against the cuffs holding him in place. The chair wobbled, threatening to fall sideways with his movements and if there was one position that would be worse than the one he was currently in, it would be having his face pressed against the floor of a bar. He threw his way the other way, feeling the legs land harshly against the floor, but stabilize.

There was a chuckle. The voice too deep for a female, yet distinctly feminine.

They’d called him Sweetie.

Saw you leaving your home. You didn’t look well, sweetie.

The person in front of him was broad shouldered. Wearing clothes that wouldn’t be out of place in a rundown gas station, but that didn’t fit with the feminine way they held themselves and the lilt of their lips.

“Such a stubborn little thing. Twice says you might have split his balls you hit so hard,” they said with a chuckle.

The hands swayed in a graceful way, the lilt of their voice, it was familiar.

You're very lonely, aren't you?

I'm your friend, Katsuki.

You can call me Big Sis Magne.

Katsuki clenched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. Trying his damnest to wake up while his heart stopped freaking the fuck out over that scare.

"Magne," he guessed, watching as her large lips pulled back in a smile.

"Clever boy."

Not clever enough to not get caught.

Or smart enough to say anything when it mattered.

Before it was too late.

"All alone here, no one to watch out for you," Magne said, her voice sounding sad. "But then, that's no different than usual for you, is it?"

"Eat shit and die," Katsuki snapped.

She tutted.

"Mm," she hums, straightening and going over to the bar where there's a vanilla folder sitting innocently on the dark wood. She waves her hand and much to Katsuki's alarm, he starts to glow blue. With one great heave, he and the chair launch across the room to slam into the side of the bar with a giant 'crack!' that echoes. Magne casually pulls out bar stools and sets them up in front of Katsuki to make something like a table. "I'm to give you food and water, but I thought we'd talk first."

"Spare me your rhetoric. You've already done a shit ton of talking, haven't you?" Katsuki snarled, thinking of the ridiculous amount of texts he'd been getting from her number. "Now it's my turn. I don't give a fuck about any of your bullshit and there's not a damn thing that any of you can do to make that less of a fact! So do me a favor and fuck off!"

"My rhetoric?" Magne said slowly. "Honey, the only thing I've done is tell you what I've observed. I haven't told you what I believe."

A vanilla folder was flipped open that he hadn't seen yet. As if she were presenting him with his own death certificate, Magne laid down the first picture. He was unsurprised to see himself in the photo.

He'd known since that first shot of him (Deku standing just outside of the shot). He'd hoped that it was a one-off thing. Some dick who'd happened to catch sight of him. Clicked a quick shot.

We see you.

But this photo proves beyond a doubt that no picture happened because of coincidence.

It was of a deserted street. Katsuki sitting on a familiar curb. One leg is drawn up to this chest, his arm slung around it like he was hugging the knee, the other leg stretched out over the curb and into the street. The angle was higher than street level. Maybe the roof of a house or from a high fence.

Either way Katsuki hadn't seen anyone the day he'd been kicked out of Haji's shop. The look on his face on that curb... no wonder Deku had stopped and asked him if he was alright. Katsuki hadn't even been aware he could *make* that face.

"You look like someone hurt you pretty bad," Magne noted.

"You don't know shit."

"Maybe not the details," Magne said slowly. "But I've had my fair share of relationships in my life to know what the end of one looks like."

"Hardly," Katsuki snapped.

"You sure, honey, cause not all relationships are romantic or even platonic or human. I loved working on my motorcycles. Building them from scratch. Using my magnetism to help keep both genders attached to their seats while giving driving lessons. I put my heart into those things and then one day..." Magne mimicked an explosion with her hand. "Poof! There was a new manager at the shop who didn't like 'my kind' and suddenly all those bikes I'd built from scratch, that I'd been using to teach others, were repossessed by the shop as their property despite how I'd used scraps to make them. Soon after that, the government found out I'd been using my quirk on the sly without a business license. My landowner found out I'd lost my job and kicked me out without much time to grab my stuff. Maybe I didn't have a

dramatic life, but it was mine. I lost the thing I loved most. The relationship with my clients, with my quiet corner of the shop, with my coworkers. Because of who I am and what I can do and I had no one to turn to for help.”

“Boo hoo, you had a rough patch, so now you kill people for a living. Sound reasoning there,” Katsuki snarled. “I didn’t ask for your tragic backstory, bitch. Didn’t you hear me when I said I *didn’t* want to hear bullshit.”

Quick as a viper, a hand was around his throat, just under his chin, the sunglasses have slid down enough for Katsuki to look into her eyes.

“Darling, I don’t kill people because I’m angry at the world or as some form of revenge. I kill them because I like the look on their faces just before I rip their throat out.” A large finger pressed hard into his throat, making it hard to breathe. “I kill for my own happiness. When I’m working for the joy of others, I just rob them and leave a trail of mangled but living bodies behind to tell the tale.”

The thumb pressed a little harder into his throat.

“And if you don’t want to hear bullshit so much then you should probably speak less.”

Another photo was laid out on the stool. The alleyway he’d cried in. The shoes he was wearing right now clutched to his chest.

“Because what I see here is a broken kid who no one thinks *deserves* to be a hero. Someone who society has deemed unworthy and too aggressive to make the world a better place.”

Another photo was laid down.

It’s him standing in front of Best Jeanist. Katsuki has upset yet another one of Best Jeanist’s fans. The guy looks upset and Katsuki vaguely remembers the man had wanted to show Jeanist a jacket design. He’d taken one look though and known the proportions were wrong. The materials listed were not structurally compatible with the type of pattern he was trying to present. Katsuki had told him bluntly that he needed to research basic sewing before he tried fancy shit.

Another failure.

“I see someone whose powerful and passionate and fearless.”

It's a shot of him at the Sport's Festival, but for once it's not the fucking chains. Katsuki is facing down the son of Endeavor, Todoroki, a wall of ice heading straight for him. Unlike the other pictures, he looks calm, ready. His hands are out, but no explosions yet. He's holding onto his fire until the last moment when the ice is on him.

Magne flips the picture.

And there's the chains.

"Who no one seems to understand, no matter how much he tries to speak clearly."

The picture is left in front of him where he can't move it at all. The metal muzzle looking up at him and the eyes of anger like two points of betrayal.

"So out of the two of us, whose bullshitting who?"

She lets go of his throat, allowing him to breathe freely. Magne stands up, giving him a long look before she goes to the large metal door and opens it. Without saying anything else, she leaves him there, with the pictures spread out in front of him, and the silence of his own thoughts as company.

There's too much time by himself.

He has no doubt that's planned.

'The attack happened because of you,' his mind whispers like poison. *'If you'd checked the texts earlier, spoken to Aizawa...'*

It's intermingled with too much noise. Too many people and too many opinions that stab him in a way they never have before, that he's forcefully blocked out for his own sanity and control.

"This tournament isn't about you! This is a school wide event that is hosted internationally! We are expected to present the winners up there whether you like it or not! This is not the time to throw a temper tantrum!"

Maybe Katsuki had been wrong.

Maybe it was his fault.

If he'd just gone along with it. If he hadn't fought so hard, been so stubborn... The food thrown at him at the Sport's festival. The cold soup served to him and the over salted food on I-island. The stares and whispers. The ice cream someone had hit him with when he went shopping for shoes.

A flaming pile of garbage personality, Sparks had said. Selfish, Sato had called him. Mean, Deku liked to say a lot. Reckless, Ponytail had called him, irresponsible Iida had said. Deku's whole nerd group had an opinion on Katsuki that he'd never cared for outside of Ponytail (fuck her and her accurate analysis bullshit). All these things that had just gone hand in hand with all the letters he was getting. All the shit people were saying about him and to him on the streets and online. Katsuki had taken all of it and shoved it into little compartments.

He was going to be a hero.

All Might stood at the top with no one surrounding him. He was bright and smiled, but he was still alone up there. There was no one that stood by his side and Katsuki had realized early on that to be the best meant to stand on his own. To depend on no one but his own strength and his own power.

"I said I'm not taking your money and your kind aren't welcome here. Get out of my store," Haji's rough voice cuts into his thoughts. He'd grown up going to that store and while he can lie to Magne and claim he hadn't been affected, it was far from the truth of the matter. He'd been shaken by that. Haji had been a rare kind voice he'd missed when he'd wandered in. His little convenience store having a lot of really good memories tied to it.

The reminder of those pictures brings back into sharp detail all the little things he'd been dealing with these last few months.

"To be honest, I'm not a fan of yours." Katsuki can hear Jeanist's voice in his ear. "Perhaps you should practice smiling in a mirror. Try for something a little less... aggressive."

The mentor who'd only seen him as something to fix.

"He's a student," the photographer for the magazine had said. "Hardly a case to warrant PTSD. It seems the violent nature reports on this kid have been warranted."

Reports. Multiple scenarios of Katsuki's 'nature.'

"Are you really trying to be a hero?" Reju demanded.

Best Jeanist primary sidekick. The one who'd called Katsuki hopeless. Heroes. Sidekicks. People he's known since childhood. Strangers. Classmates. Professional psychologists. Reporters. His own teachers.

Villains.

There was no one on his side. There was not a soul out there who believed in him. No one who thought Katsuki was hero material. Was he?

He'd never questioned it.

Even when the whole fucking world seemed intent on making him think otherwise. Katsuki was going to be a hero. He would get that top spot. He'd beat back the villains. Fight to maintain law and order. Stand on his own, fight by himself with no one by his side, no matter the odds. Just like All Might.

Except Katsuki had led the villains right to the camp.

That was his fault.

They'd told him they were coming and Katsuki had thought nothing of it. He'd known for twenty-four hours before the attack that someone might try to get to him. Yet he hadn't said a blasted thing to anyone.

He'd kept silent.

People had gotten hurt. Maybe worse. All Katsuki had cared about was his own issues. He hadn't thought about how the harassment might affect other people. His parents. His classmates. His teachers.

The letters and the phone calls, the texts, and the treatment out in public, none of it had ever involved anyone else. He should have anticipated it though. He should have known that this shit could escalate like that.

"You can't keep climbing forever, Katsuki, eventually you're going to fall."

He has to wonder what his mom will think of this fall.

Of the gaping hole he'd dragged other people into.

“Upset someone finally started calling you out on your shit?”

She'd been right about him this whole time. He'd spent so long denying her words, trying to chuck it up to how awful of a person she was being. The constant declarations of what he was doing wrong, how everything that he was, was nothing good.

“How long have I told you that you won't be able to get away with being a little asshole forever, huh?” She called after him. “Now the whole world is getting to know you, brat! You're going to have to change or...”

If there was nothing about him that was good, if you stripped everything away from him, then who would exist under all of that? Was there anything positive about Katsuki? Anything that anyone had ever liked?

“Don't ruin the trip for everyone else, Katsuki, try your best not to be yourself.”

Deku seemed to think Katsuki's only redeeming quality was that he never gave up no matter how hard things get.

But maybe he should have given in a long time ago.

Maybe it was best for everyone if he became something else.

His stomach growls so loud in the empty bar that someone passing by the door chuckles. It's not a familiar voice so it can't be Magne or Twice or Hands freak. All the terror and panic from before has faded away in the face of boredom and the pit that is his stomach.

Exhaustion is a heavy contributor to his lack of emotional awareness and lack of reaction when the door is kicked open and the scarred fucker marches in, food container in hand, the smell is almost enough to make him sick, but he finds his eyes watching the Styrofoam, heat rising from what looks like meat buns.

This is the man who'd grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him through the portal. The one who'd set the forest on fire with a bunch of unconscious teens in it.

“You done being stubborn?” Scar face asks.

“You done kidnapping people against their will?” Katsuki shoots back.

He’s tired, not dim-witted.

The man snorts, dropping the container down on the bar before using a chopstick to skewer it. The white bun is shoved into his face, hovering there, a faint smell of teriyaki coming from the steamed dough.

“It’s not poisoned, you idiot, just eat.”

The scar freak made a fatal mistake in shoving the bun harshly against his mouth. Katsuki didn’t hesitate for even a moment to open his mouth wide and bite down on one of the few places not burnt to shit. Clamping down on the back of the fucker’s hand and using his larger than natural canines to dig in as deep as possible.

The furious yell and repeated knocks to the head were well worth it to see a chunk of skin coming away and the blood of his enemy pouring out onto the floor. Katsuki grinned, feeling blood run down his chin and spitting at the fucker’s feet.

“My mom hits harder than you,” Katsuki told him.

There was a flash in the man’s eyes for a moment, the bitten hand is shoved into a pocket, the irritation rolling off of him in waves. Scar face leaves the bun on the floor, giving him a disgusted look as he stomps out of the room and slams the door behind him.

Fuck.

That meat bun really did smell really good.

It’s still steaming even though it’s covered in dust and dirt, a streak of blood against its white surface. Like his brand new white fucking shoes.

He’s not sure how long it’s been, only that he’s gotten tired enough to fall asleep again and woke up to hours and hours of isolation. All his muscles feel bunched up from being trapped in the same position and there’s a part of him that’s worries if he does manage to get out of his position, that his legs will fail him. He desperately wants to pop his

back and there's an ever present ache in his neck that's going to take forever to work out.

Two people come to shove water down his throat just when he thought he might pass out from dehydration. One to hold his head back by his hair and the second to clutch Katsuki's throat until he's forced to gasp. The lid is forced between his lips and he gags, water sliding down his chin and soaking his shirt as they hold him in place. The lizard lets go as soon as half the bottle is gone, setting it aside, while Magne tuts at him in disapproval.

"As admirable as this is, dear, you're really only hurting yourself. No one here wants to see you damaged in any way," Magne tells him as she wipes his face. Getting far too close for him to be comfortable, but not close enough for him to do damage like he had with Scar face's hand.

"Stain would not agree with this," Lizard man muttered under his breath. His eyes never quite landed on Katsuki, his head always turned away like he couldn't bring himself to look at Katsuki.

"Hush Spinner, you know very well how this kid was going to end up," Magne says, patting the purple hair in a fond manner.

"You guys going for a theme?" Katsuki doesn't realize he spoke the thought out loud until both of the League of Bastards members are looking right at him. He leans back in the leather straps, staring them down. "Purple, maroon, black, grey... it's like someone picked you all out of an emo catalog for Villain's Magazine. I'm the brightest fucking thing in this room and that's just fucking sad."

Spinner choked on his own spit, guffawing as Magne fought a smile.

"I've seen your skulls, dear, I don't think you'd entirely stand out if we got together for poster signings," Magne said, waving her hand at him. "There's a lot to be said out cohesive design across the board, but you'd know all about that wouldn't you?"

She grins, her large lips not quite pulling far back enough to show off her teeth, so the vicious grin doesn't come off as sinister as it should. The reminder though, that she's been stalking him for a while, leaves a different sort of dread pooling inside of him.

"Why didn't you go after me before?" Katsuki finds himself asking, watching her carefully. "Yah got a fucked up statement to make, I get it, but what the fuck does attacking a bunch of teenagers who aren't

legally allowed to fight yet accomplish outside of making yourselves look like child murderers? What's the angle here?"

"The point is proving that we should be allowed to use our quirks outside of business purposes," Magne told him.

"That quirks are apart of who we are!" Spinner cut in, his raised voice echoing in the otherwise empty room. "Denying us the simple right to be ourselves and restricting the use of our quirks is inhumane."

"So you'd rather every fucking idiot be allowed to do whatever they please?" Katsuki snapped. "We've seen the results of that! The fucking collapse of every government on the planet. Wars on every continent. Half the god damn population got wiped out in the first fifty years quirks existed! And that was only when fifteen percent of the population had them!"

Japan itself had nearly been wiped off the face of the planet at one point. They hadn't struggled for over two hundred years to build themselves back up just to have it destroyed because a few lunatics wanted the free use of their laser beam fingernails.

"The first few governments decided that shit was a good idea and disappeared soon after for that fucking stupidity. Regulations and proof of suitable use is the only fucking system that works. Seventy-five years ago Australia tried to institute 'free use within reason' and what the fuck happened to them? The entire barrier reef was destroyed... eliminated off the face of the god damn planet within three fucking hours of legalization. It's not like people want to be so restricted, but there's too much stupidity running rampant in people for that kind of system to work! You guys are case and points!"

"History buff, are you?" Magne asked.

"If you don't understand the foundations and structure of the place you're going to dominate then you'll just end up as another B-list moron who obeys for reasons beyond their understanding," Katsuki snapped. "I'm gonna be the number one hero and I'll bury you fuckers under my heel so you never get up again."

Spinner shook his head in disgust.

"How can someone be so..." he gestured with his talon, "...and yet so...?"

"The mystery that is Katsuki Bakugou, I suppose," Magne said. She

seemed completely unbothered by his words, as if he amused her more than anything else. It really pissed him off. “And one that Tomura wishes to resolve. We’ll be back later. Our boss has finally deemed it time to speak with you face to face.”

Katsuki uses the little bit of water that hasn’t dried in his mouth yet to spit at their feet.

“I won’t ask you to behave, but do try to not get yourself killed,” Magne said, looking stonier than she has this whole time. “Tomura doesn’t have a lot of patience and he had a tendency to be trigger happy so if you upset him then that might be it for you.”

She shrugs, grabbing the half-empty water bottle on her way out, thanking Spinner who holds the door open for her. Who says chivalry is dead? You’d think she hadn’t just casually warned him he might die in the next few hours.

He bucks at the restraints again but like his dad’s sad attempts at opening the mayonnaise jar, they remain firmly locked against him. Unlike his dad though... no one is going to try to loosen it for him.

...Or the League of Bastards are a bunch of hyped-up fucking imbeciles who definitely plan on loosening the restraints on him.

Dabi stares him down hard, his hands are still in his pockets and he looks like untying Katsuki is the absolute last thing on this planet he wants to do.

“Huh? This guy’s going to fight, you know?” Dabi says dryly, because yeah, apparently scar fucker is the only one whose been paying attention these last few days.

“It’s fine,” Hand freak throws his hand back in a casual ‘devil may care’ gesture. “We need to treat him like an equal since we’re scouting him.”

Right.

Because that shit was a thing.

It’s not as if he hadn’t guessed it considering Magne’s little fucking speech, but it’s different to hear the concrete offer here, in front of the

entire group of dangerous lunatics. The gate fucker sitting behind the bar like it's the most natural thing in the world, cleaning a glass while listening to everyone like that had been in the job description.

Magne's eyes have been trained on him since these fuckers gathered and started yapping like tiny dogs faced with a fence between them.

'Bartender. Villain Babysitter. Has to be a good listener while multitasking cleaning dishes.'

"Besides, you can tell if you'll win or not if you fight in this situation, right U.A student?" Hand freak asks.

Katsuki's reminded of just who surrounds him here.

Twice, the Gollum/Smeagol fuck, who duplicates shit.

Magne, his stalker, and some shitty trick with magnetism and genders.

Dabi, scar freak, 'Mr. let's burn the whole fucking forest with teenagers in it,' motherfucker.

Compress, the fucker who got him in the forest, Mr. bad touch.

Spinner, the lizard fuck, whose only skills seemed to be being obnoxiously loud.

Gate bitch with his neck brace weakness.

Toga, the blood-sucking cunt who hadn't been allowed in the bar alone with him, which yeah, fucking alarms going off there if the known murderer with a throat fetish was a better choice.

And Hand freak who decays whatever he touches with all five fingers. The lunatic who thought taking on All Might in his free time was a lovely way to spend the afternoon and who lost his shit when he didn't get his way.

That's eight different ways he's fucked over, but is that going to stop him?

Dabi knows the answer, Katsuki desperately wants to know if the bite mark is going to scar. 'Consequences of no healer because you're asshole's' club.

"Twice, you do it."

“What, me? No way.”

Still feeling the spit in his balls. No doubt. He fights to keep the vicious, spiteful grin off his face.

“Do it,” Dabi deadpans, the scar fucker is keeping his distance, back to the wall, watching Katsuki warily. He never came back to the room after that first and last attempt at feeding him.

“Man...” Twice mutters in displeasure.

“I do apologize for using such forceful methods.” The compress freak calls out from across the room. “But please understand we are not just a mob trying to commit crimes. We didn’t kidnap you by accident.”

He can barely hear the babbling over the sound of chains clinking as Twice actually starts to unlock the quirk suppressant. A part of him thinks it’s a joke. They can’t be serious. But then Hand freak stands up, sounding oddly calm, even... dare Katsuki think it, cheerful.

The quirk restraint released.

His wrists came free and Katsuki grasped at them. Pain flares as he moves the joints of his fingers, messaging the rubbed raw wrists and trying to make the numb feeling go away. Twice is working on the leather strapping his thighs down, fingers rough as they tug and pull. He bends his knees to get the blood flowing again.

“Even though our situations differ, everyone here has been restricted and suffered because of people... rules... and heroes...”

He rears back with his leg.

“...I’m sure you also-”

And slams his foot straight into Twice’s face. The sound of bone cracking fills the air even as he launches himself forward, palm igniting and slams his fist straight into Hand Freak’s face. The grey-skinned corpse-like hand falls to the ground with a ‘thud.’

“Shigaraki!” Twice yells out, still clutching his face on the ground.

Katsuki steps back, keeping his hands smoking as he faces the eight villains before him. Spinners startled face, large eyes contrasting with Magne’s narrowed slits and ready stance.

“I listened quietly to your endless talking,” Katsuki hissed as he

steadied himself. "Idiots can't get to the point so they're always talking for a long time. Basically, you mean 'We want to harass people, so please join us,' right?"

Katsuki lifted his head, staring straight at Hand's freak's face.

"Don't bother!"

Even if he wasn't what the world wanted.

Even if he wasn't what people thought a hero should be.

He was still Katsuki fucking Bakugou.

"I want to win like All Might. No matter what anyone says, that will never change!"

If there was one good thing in this world about him.

It was that he never gave up.

Right, Deku?

Hand freak turned, his red eyes blazing, Katsuki paused as he tried to figure out what would be his next move.

"Shigaraki!" Gate fucker called out warningly. "Wait!"

Hand freak put his hand out, never breaking eye contact with Katsuki, the eye was considering. Sizing him up. Looking pleased by what he found. That was not good.

"Nobody touches him. He's an important piece to me."

Yeah. Hard pass.

Those red eyes look like they are trying to hook into his soul.

"Kurogiri, Compress, make him go to sleep again."

Oh, fuck that shit, there's no way Mr. bad touch and gate fucker are getting their hands on him again.

Compress shrugged and sighed as he stepped forward, Katsuki braced his weak legs, feeling them wobble underneath him from beating trapped in the chair for so long.

“I can’t believe he’s such a bad listener. I’m almost impressed.”

Katsuki sidestepped towards the door, watching out of the corner of his eyes as Gate fucker moved one step forward as well to intercept him.

“If you want me to listen to you then get on your knees and die!” He snarled, his eyes going towards the door. He wanted to blow them all up at max firepower, but the warp bastard was in the way. If he shot out his blast and the fucker sent it out to a random street then it would not only waste Katsuki’s only chance, but people might get hurt.

Think.

He needed to make an opening to get to the metal door. The fuckers had left it open. Confident in Katsuki’s containment. He’d listened for the sound of the lock when they’d entered, but none of them has bothered with it.

Compress continued forward, hand reaching out for him.

‘Knock.’

‘Knock.’

‘Knock.’

What? Katsuki turned to the door, blinking in confusion.

“Hello! This is Pizza-La, Kamino Store.”

Katsuki only has enough time to wonder ‘how the hell did the guy get into the building’ when the brick wall at his side explodes inwards. Chunks of stone hit him and Katsuki throws his arms up to cover his face, looking out into the open sky of a cityscape, a familiar man standing at the gaping hole. Blue eyes set against pitch-black staring right at him in relief.

All Might.

All Might had actually come for him

Symbol of Destruction

Chapter Summary

The inside of Katsuki's head is a very dark place at the moment, but to be fair, the outside isn't much better

Chapter 6: Symbol of Destruction

His parent's flight had landed eighteen hours after Katsuki had been dragged through the portal by his neck. His mother had stormed into the precinct with 'righteous motherly fury,' still dressed in the old man's latest design. A description that left him coughing hard into his hands to hide the deep chested laugh of disbelief. The police officer who'd sat beside him after he'd been brought in giving him the side eye as he described this to him second hand.

That had been very early yesterday morning.

His parents had been told to 'stand by' which he guessed hadn't been well received after rushing back from their trip like they had. He feared for the pedestrians on the road right now, no doubt the police officers trying to warn his parents off from entering the city. There was probably a long line of police officers who now had Katsuki Bakugou's parents ingrained in their minds for life.

"They'll be here soon," the man reassured him.

Katsuki hummed.

A medical quirk user had looked him over and outside of dehydration, hunger, and exhaustion, there was nothing physically wrong with him. A few bumps and bruises, easily taken care of. The League of Villains hadn't exactly been a 5-star hotel, but even Katsuki realized that things could have been a lot worse.

He had his back to the window, wherein the distance the sheer destruction of Kamino ward was set for all to see. Sirens had been blaring for hours, the sun was well in the sky. Buildings had caved in from the attack. Bodies were still being counted. Fires were still being put out.

And here he was.

Fucking fine.

Not a scratch on him.

There wasn't even a tear in his clothes. He'd made it out completely unscathed while being in the god damn epicenter of events. Right there where All Might and All For One had duked it out and there wasn't even a tear in his clothes to show for it. Just a layer of dust covering him from his no longer white shoes to the tips of his hair. He felt his jaw tremble for a moment, but he tapped down on that shit real quick.

He wasn't about to throw himself a fucking pity party.

“Katsuki Bakugou?”

He looked up to see another police officer. The man knelt down in front of him, which Katsuki appreciated, even though he'd never say it out loud. It had been three full days since he'd slept, the few jarring moments he'd managed to snatch here and there in that god damn chair when he wasn't being woken by creepy stalkers. The man held out his hand.

“I'm detective Tsukauchi, I know its been a harrowing few days for you, but if you're up for it, I'd like to ask you a few questions.” Katsuki stared at the hand for far too long, eyeing the black circles under the detective's eyes. He shrugged, disregarding the offered hand to stand wobbly to his feet. The hand dropped, not looking offended in the least.

For some stupid reason that loosened a bit of the tension sitting between his shoulders.

He was led to a lounge room and Katsuki quirked an eyebrow, having expected some kind of interrogation room, the detective noticed and shrugged.

“Figured the last thing I'd want after what you went through is another room designed to make you feel unsettled.”

Valid.

Katsuki slunk into one of the couches, a police officer who'd walked in took one look at him and the detective and pulled a 180 so sharply that he was honestly impressed. The door closed with a click and as the warmth of the room and the softness of the seat settled on him,

Katsuki found his eyes drooping. Tsukauchi made a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat that had him straightening immediately, blinking so hard that it actually hurt.

“I’ll try to keep this short,” Tsukauchi told him.

He was true to his word. He asked what happened directly after he was pulled into the portal. Katsuki told him how the Compress fucker’s quirk caused paralysis to its victims for about thirty seconds after your body returns to you. How by the time he could twitch his fingers they already had him strapped into the quirk restraints. How he was wrestled into the chair. He told the man about how they left him there for a while. Twice’s visit. Dabi’s visit.

At Magne’s though he hesitated.

The bastard was good at his job though because he seemed to notice this immediately. Pausing in writing to look up at Katsuki.

“You said she talked to you?” He prompted, eyes watching him carefully.

Katsuki shrugged.

“Gave a spiel about how she became a villain. The world it unfair, blah, blah, blah,” Katsuki said, rubbing the back of his neck.

The detective tapped his pen on his paper, still watching him.

“But that’s not all she said, was it?” He asked gently.

Katsuki shrugged.

The pictures sat at the forefront of his mind.

“Oh sweetie, you are an absolute mess.”

Saw you leaving your home. You didn’t look well.

“Clever boy.”

You’re very lonely, aren’t you?

“You look like someone hurt you pretty badly.”

We see you.

“Did she hurt you?” Tsukauchi asked sharply, his eyes going up and down his form. Katsuki looked away, shaking his head slowly. He startled at the light tap that touched his arm. “Bakugou, sometimes the way people hurt you isn’t physical, did she hurt you?” The man asked, sharp eyes watching him. “Make you feel uncomfortable? Touch you inappropriately?” Each question was followed by a pause before another followed quickly in its stead. “Did she say something that hurt? What did she say to you?”

Flustered wasn’t a word he’d normally associate with himself but at the rapid-fire question that was exactly what he felt.

“Was it of a sexual nature?”

What?

“Did she threaten you in some way?”

“What did she threaten you with?”

“Physically?”

“Emotionally?”

“Emotionally... insults? Blackmail? No. Not quite. Something personal?”

“Stop!” Katsuki pushed away, stumbling backward.

Detective Tsukauchi blinked, and for the first time, Katsuki saw his eyes were unnaturally dilated.

“Sorry. I... I normally have better control over my quirk than that.” The detective rubbed at the black shadows under his eyes. “I meant for this to be a casual conversation, but when you started withholding, I slipped.”

Katsuki kept his back to the wall, feeling his heart pumping too fast, his hands shaking. The detective looked apologetic as he held his hands up.

“My quirk is... I can read the truth in your body language. The way you react to questions tells me the answer. Like... right now, I can see that your unnerved and on edge. You feel betrayed. Like I lulled you into a false sense of security before taking advantage of you. Your exhausted but high strung from events.”

Katsuki watched, the man himself tilting to the side.

“To be honest with you, I haven’t slept since the night you were taken. That’s no excuse, of course, but I should have known not to carry this out right now. I just didn’t... I didn’t want you to have to deal with this later.”

The man stood, smiling grimly at him.

“Why don’t we pick this up on another day?” The man offered.

Fuck that shit, was his immediate response, but he found himself nodding. He could barely stand. The detective’s pocket buzzed. He watched as the man answered, running his fingers through his hair roughly as a high-pitched voice came through. The words were indistinct, much to his displeasure.

“Your parents are here.”

The words didn’t bring the release he’d been expecting. Even the thought of being able to sleep in his own bed didn’t quite match up to the thought of dealing with his mom for the next few hours.

He froze, glancing at the detective, watching as the man’s eyes dilated again as they scrutinized him. With stiff determined steps, Katsuki walked out of the room and toward the center of the police station where his parents were waiting.

The Hag had stationed herself in front of King Orca. The Pro Hero had his arms folded and looked decided too wary to deal with his mom’s bullshit. Katsuki didn’t blame him. The old man... shit. His dad looked like he’d aged ten years overnight. He hardly recognized the haggard, poorly dressed, figure in front of him.

Katsuki blinked.

His dad’s socks didn’t match.

One bright orange and the other a deep forest green. Katsuki’s colors. He stumbled forward and the noise he caused made his dad turn. The old man’s look of shock and alarm, mixed equal with relief would have... on any other day, been freaking hilarious.

Today though... that face was the last thing Katsuki saw before he slipped away in a dead faint. The sound of his father’s shout and something large and warm grabbing him under his arms the last thing

he felt.

The closest he can describe what happens next is a fevered dream. Though at no point is he too hot, his body feels like lead, and there's an odd sensation of being maneuvered. Touched. There are a few moments when his eyes slide open to, once when something warm slides down his face, drying quickly. Crusting.

"...always knew this was going to come to a head, didn't we?"

Her voice is sharp. Grating. It hurts to hear.

"Do you even hear yourself anymore?"

His voice is gruff. Strained. Rasping. Deep. Frayed at the edges.

"I'm not... I'm not saying I'm happy about it. I'm not saying this is right or just. I'm just saying that we should have tried harder."

"To what?! Mitsuki, he's a child! He's going to make mistakes! You're so... you're so hung up on where he's stumbled that you can't see the path he's taken at all! You..."

Katsuki fades out like a badly scripted movie. Sinking into the darkness. The second time is when he feels arms move under his knees and his back.

"Wake him up. For fuck's sake Masaru, he can walk. The medic said they didn't lay a scratch on him. The only thing you're proving here is the fastest way to earn yourself a hernia."

"Katsuki fainted," his dad's voice sounds tired like he's been arguing for an age and a half. "You're right. Katsuki is strong. He's stubborn and obstinate and has enough passion to fuel the sun itself. For some reason, your deadset on seeing that as wrong, but the least you could do is acknowledge that if *Katsuki* faints then it's not some half-cocked cry for attention!"

His dad grunts.

"And even if it was, even if he just wants someone he loves to hold him, what the fuck is wrong with that, Mitsuki?! So get the god damn door so I can carry my son inside."

“You're missing my entire point...” she says in a hiss.

The slits he's managed to break open seal shut.

A door swings open and there's a feeling of weightlessness.

And then warmth.

He woke alone. It's obvious night has long since fallen. On instinct, he tugs at the restraints only to find his arms come free. They fling into the air in front of him and Katsuki sits up, wiping drool from his face as he realizes he'd been lying down. He stares blankly at his house.

He doesn't remember getting here from the police station.

Vague images flash in his head that don't really make sense. Quiet angry voices and the feeling of being heavy and floating at the same time. He rubs hard at his forehead as he looks around.

His teacup is on the table. A cheesy All Might themed teacup brimming with long cold tea that's been set up next to a small tray of biscuits wrapped carefully in tinfoil. He knows there's cheddar cheese and jalapenos baked into the bread without looking. His dad's special spicy curry sauce laid out in a small little dipping cup normally reserved for dipping oils.

It's hard to get himself to move. A part of him wants to curl up in a ball and go back to sleep, but there's a nasty, gnawing sensation in his stomach that reminds him just how long it's been since he's eaten.

He knows if he doesn't get up now, then he won't be able to later.

Katsuki warms up the bread and tea. He shoves the first biscuit into his mouth with too much gusto, choking a bit, but washing it down with the now too hot tea. It burns his tongue. Of course, a few minutes later he feels like a real jackass as his tongue burns in an entirely different way as he spews chunks across the sink.

Fucking dumbass.

He ate it too fast.

He pulls apart the second one, forcing himself to eat only half and a with increments in between. It's hard because the moment the first

small bite hits his stomach it's like the acid comes alive, trying to devour him from the inside out. He breathes through his nose as he sips more carefully at the tea. Bites more cautiously at the biscuit.

The walls are familiar, even being alone slides into place like a well-practiced muscle movement in one of his more complicated maneuvers. Katsuki knows this is how its supposed to be. Nothing is out of place.

But *he* feels out of place.

Every shadow looms and every creak is a footstep. The clock on the wall ticks towards two in the morning. A whole day lost. He's wide awake now, free to move, but he doesn't. He stays on the couch, staring at his empty teacup until light pours out of the window well past dawn.

The light is so unlike the little windowless bar room he'd been locked in that his body finally begins to relax the slightest bit. Unclenching in the same manner he normally associates with coming in from a snowstorm. Joints frozen and hard, cold along the spine, legs numb.

His heart, fluttering like a hummingbird in his chest, settles down to a more sedate vulture in its beats. A hulking mass in his chest that feels far too big there. As if it were swollen with left over fear now that adrenaline was running thin.

Footsteps sound.

Katsuki tilts his head towards the stairs to see his mom coming down, her red eyes, so similar to his staring at him oddly.

"Nice to see your finally up," his mom says quietly.

Katsuki stares back in morbid fascination. He feels like an alien getting a glimpse of something he's seen a thousand times before but now doesn't quite fit. Only he doesn't know if it's him or if it's her.

He missed his own reunion.

The thought is oddly funny. He'd fucking missed his own reunion with his family. And as much as he'd dreaded meeting his mother there, now he feels like he missed something essential. Like a chance slipped out between his fingers before he'd even realized it might be there in the first place.

“Yeah,” Katsuki lets the word fall out blankly. “What I’d miss?”

And that sounds funny, doesn’t it?

Cause he saw the earth-shattering moment when All Might won. He’d stood there and watched it happen. The man who Katsuki saw as power itself, crumble away into dust coming after Katsuki. Putting himself bodily in front of All For One to stop those ugly vicious black and red threads from sinking into him. Taking him.

Katsuki was the reason for the end of All Might.

The reason for the attack on the camp.

Deku and the others getting hurt.

For his own capture by Villains.

The Hag snorts, but it's softer than normal. Is she in one of her fond moments? It doesn’t seem like it. She’s all edges and hard eyes, crossed arms. She hasn’t said anything yet though. She’s treading carefully. Moving slowly.

Katsuki’s not sure what to do with this in between fond and hateful thing that's going on.

She sits on the couch, close enough that their knees touch.

“What am I supposed to do with you, brat?” She asks.

Katsuki shrugs.

“Your father threw out his back carrying you last night, the fool, serves him right for coddling you.”

He tensed, but for once there’s no aggressiveness in her voice. She keeps talking.

“I have to take him to the hospital. There’s a hero hanging about the neighborhood watching after you. You’re on house arrest, police orders, no one wants any more trouble from you for the rest of the summer.”

Katsuki nodded.

“That means no jogging either! No need to get yourself kidnapped a second time.”

He flinched a little at that one.

She frowns at him, one hand on her hip.

“You get it now, don’t you?” Mitsuki demands, her voice still that oddly quiet tone to it. She reaches forward and ruffles Katsuki’s hair in that fond manner of hers. “Enough people have been indirectly hurt by your actions these last few days, brat. People have died. The attention-seeking, the fear mongering, bullying... it needs to stop. Here and now.”

“That’s not me,” Katsuki whispered.

The hand on his head stilled. The fingers tightening before loosening. Mitsuki bent down and sat on the coffee table so that she was facing Katsuki directly. Her lips were thin as they pressed into a frown.

“What? Speak up. You know I hate that.”

“That’s not me,” Katsuki repeated, louder.

“Katsuki...”

His mother’s voice sounded so tired.

“I’m not the person you think I am,” Katsuki bit out. He’d fucked up. He’d fucked up so badly, but it wasn’t because he bullied anyone or was seeking attention or trying to make people afraid of him. He’d put his whole heart into becoming a hero. He’d fought everyone with all of his skills and his passion. Giving it his all. He’s always tried to be as honest as possible, straight forward about his opinions.

He’d helped Kirishima study for the exams.

He’d tried his best to do what Jeanist wanted of him.

He’s studied none stop and created a work out routine.

He avoided conflict, not going out unless he needed to.

Katsuki did everything asked of him from his teachers and his parents while still staying true to himself.

He hadn’t stepped forward about the messages though.

He hadn’t been strong enough to keep away from the Villains.

"Then why did they want you?" His mom's voice cut into his thoughts. "I know you want to be a hero and I know you're capable of it, but Katsuki, why would Villains want you if they didn't see what I see in you sometimes. I'm not saying you're a Villain, baby, I'm not, but this constant fighting you do; the belligerence, the attitude, the bullying."

"That was just Deku," Katsuki snapped. "You act like I went and bullied half the fucking school!"

"And what has he ever done to you, Katsuki? Huh? What has that poor boy ever done to be hit and pushed around!? Insulted and belittled?!"

"If he would leave me alone then I'd be happy to never look at his face again!" Katsuki snapped in exasperation. "But its been over a year since I last pushed him anyways."

If you didn't count the exercise where they were pitted against one another... and together.

"Right, after he saved your life," his mom said with a scoff. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"I'm not trying to... fuck! Why can't you...?"

"Why can't I what?!"

"For once, for fucking once can we not talk about Deku?" Katsuki pleaded.

"Maybe if you actually used his name!" His mom shot back.

"He's never once in his whole god damn life used mine! Why does it matter? Just listen!"

"I have been listening and it sounds like you're still doing the exact same thing you've always done. Blaming everyone else but yourself!"

"Whose blaming who on what? I've admitted to pushing the shitty nerd around! He stalks me, I push him! It's just how it is! If he left me alone then there wouldn't be any issues!"

"We both know you've done some malicious things to him, Katsuki, don't you dare lie about it!"

Katsuki breathed through his nose, clenching and unclenching his hands.

“How did we even get onto this topic?”

Every fucking time.

Like a broken record.

She was so fucking hung up on this. Never letting it go. He and Deku were always swinging like a pendulum from good terms to neutral to awful and back again.

“You don’t know shit!” Katsuki hissed. “You don’t know shit and you never have! You always just assume every time I walk out the door that I’m up to no good!”

Mitsuki’s voice was no longer quiet.

“The Sport’s Festival proved exactly how out of control you are in front of everyone! At every point, you were a fucking monster!”

Katsuki flinched back from the words.

“It was a competition,” Katsuki gritted out. “All I did was try my best, like everyone else out there!”

“Your best? No one would have had to chain Izuku up like that. No one would have had to chain *any* of your classmates up.”

“I said no!” Katsuki snarled. “That’s all I did! All I did was that I told them no!”

“When will you learn that what you want doesn’t matter!”

Katsuki’s mouth snapped shut as he glared at the ground.

“Being a hero is about being selfless, Katsuki, it’s about sacrifice and about caring about others. It’s about rescuing people. Grow the fuck up already! Stop acting like a child. Have you even stopped to consider how this has affected your father and I? We were worried sick! We almost lost you because your behavior and your actions drew their attention. *Villains* scouted you. *Villains*, Katsuki, and you can’t delude yourself into thinking it had anything to do with your godforsaken talent or strength.”

It’s your fault.

Katsuki pulled the blanket closer to himself as his mom stormed away. She started gathering her purse and shoes. His dad struggled down the

stairs, giving Katsuki a watery smile, hunched over at an awkward angle. He helped his dad down the stairs and into the car. The whole time the man whispered about how happy he was that Katsuki was alright. How he'd make Katsuki's favorite tonight when they got back. How much he loved Katsuki.

The old man was still wearing the mismatched socks.

He can't leave the house. There's a police officer on guard duty down the street though Katsuki doesn't really see how the man is supposed to be of any use if the League of Bastards decides to say howdy-do on his front step. 'Don't leave the house,' like these four walls are going to stop a quirk that rots everything it touches, fire and compression, blood and knives, duplication and mutations and magnetism.

It's laughable.

If the League was subtle enough to try to pick him up while on a jog or going to the grocery store then they would have done that the first fucking time. No. They wanted to make a statement; look at us! We can grab this child even under heavily protected circumstances where there are six Pro-heroes and forty heroes in training! We can do that with just seven people.

Yeah, one police officer and four walls ain't going to do shit.

He doesn't go outside though.

He doesn't argue.

He goes along with the bullshit because the adults are all looking at him, waiting for something to happen. For him to lose his shit and start screaming at them, for him to break down and start sobbing, for him to try to go after the league himself... he doesn't fucking know what they're waiting for, but he doesn't want to give it to them. Whatever that might be.

He doesn't want to prove them more right than they already are about what they think he is or who they think he'll become.

Katsuki hides in his room and he does so many sit-ups, pull-ups, and

pushups that he feels like he's gonna vomit. He paces until he sees dots and then collapses and reads news articles and watches videos like a god damn masochist.

There's nothing that surprises him.

Nothing he hasn't already seen or read before all of this happened.

Except one thing.

There's a lot of videos on the Symbol of Peace, All Might, that makes his insides freeze, but there is an underlying theme when Katsuki is mentioned. It seems that Katsuki has become his own symbol.

"One has to wonder if it was all worth it," Senji Fu says, looking right into the video's camera. It's the reporter on the streets. The one who grabbed him. The one who worked for the well-known magazine.

"What do you mean?" The other reporter in this discussion is a woman, her voice is sharp and there's a narrow way she's eyeing the man, like she can't quite believe what he's saying, but she's entirely fascinated by it.

"Yes, All Might managed to take down the head of the League of Villains, but this was done sloppily. Civilian lives were lost in this operation. The evacuation was half-assed in this and the scope of this devastating attack was of a much larger scale than the police or heroes anticipated."

"That seems a rather harsh judgement," the woman says carefully. "Police lost their lives in this attack too. A large number of heroes were harmed, some fatally. It's not as if they planned for things to turn out the way it did."

"Exactly! And for what? The retirement of our symbol of peace, All Might, debilitating injuries to some of our best, including number 4 hero, Best Jeanist. Police and civilians killed... all for the rescue attempt of one child who- very suspiciously, didn't have a single scratch on him."

Katsuki paused the video, tossing his phone aside.

He'd listened to the full interview three times already. Each time

feeling sicker and sicker. The fall of the symbol of peace. A death toll that kept rising. One of Best Jeanist's lungs completely destroyed. The entire Kamino ward on lockdown with collapsing buildings still happening the day after what was being called 'The Kamino Incident.'

All his fault.

If Katsuki hadn't been involved, as Senji, pointed out, more bases could have been covered. The heroes had been on a time crunch though. Everyone knew that the first 48 hours of a kidnapping were the most important. That it was vital to not have the person transported to a second location. The second location was usually death. In the end, hadn't that been what Shigiraki was about to do? They were about to go to a second location. They hadn't accepted his firm no for an answer. They had tried to drag him away with them again. They'd attacked him with knives and quirks alike, unafraid to hurt him this time if it meant getting him to go and do what they wanted.

If he'd been taken that second time...

"Darling, I don't kill people because I'm angry at the world or as some form of revenge. I kill them because I like the look on their faces just before I rip their throat out." A large finger pressed hard into his throat, making it hard to breathe. "I kill for my own happiness. When I'm working for the joy of others, I just rob them and leave a trail of mangled but living bodies behind to tell the tale."

Who knew what they would have done to him, only that it sure as hell wouldn't have been good. What had they needed him for though? That was what had been sitting on the tip of his tongue. He hadn't allowed himself to ask because that implied interest in the garbage they were spewing.

But... now knowing sort of bothered him.

The video had gone on to theorize more about the disaster. If the heroes had time to plan, to form evacuations properly, to involve more heroes, then such a devastating attack would have been unlikely. But because Katsuki had been weak, because he'd been captured by villains, the plans had become put to a time clock.

It wasn't just Senji Fu though.

Forums. Quora. Reddit. [H]er(0)es. Bloggers. Youtubers. Twitter. Instagram. Every big media outlet, with a few exceptions here and

there, had come to the same consensus.

Katsuki Bakugou was not worth the damage that had been done.

The letters had increased. Like some sort of sick game, Katsuki couldn't stop opening them. He knew he should. He should just use them all as kindling. But that same voice from the beginning of all this still whispered in his ear; **don't be a coward.**

Face it.

Face what you've done.

So he did.

He opened one after another. Some of them were condolences. Painting him as a victim and hoping he gets better. These were odd ones. Sprinkled here and there and he wasn't sure what to do with these mild-mannered, soft-spoken letters from people he didn't know. They always spoke in terms that were formal and well-wishing.

The other kind of letters rarely spoke in formal tones. Reading the words and the threats and the condemnations and roastings. Some of it made sense to Katsuki.

How can you live with yourself knowing what you've done? If All Might is the Symbol of Peace then you are the Symbol of Destruction.

You need to resign from UA. It's the right thing to do. You don't deserve to be a hero and everyone knows it.

The entire attack on the camp was your fault. The League of Villains only attacked to get ahold of you. All those students who suffered injuries and inhaling poisoned gas were hurt because of you.

The Sport's Festival proved what a monster you are, it's no surprise the Villains wanted you, why couldn't you have just stayed with them? Pretending you're a hero is just a sick joke at this point. You don't deserve to breathe the same air as All Might.

These letters hurt, but he got them. He understood why they were being said and what the point was. A lot of other letters didn't make any sense though. They seemed to throw out random insults just to try to hurt him. Things that had nothing to do with him or the things that

had happened. Attacks on his looks, on his family, odd threats, sexual advances that really weirded him out.

You look like a starving, crazy animal trying to bite anyone that comes near.

Your family should have drowned you as a toddler.

I bet you smell real nice with your face shoved in my...

Where once he could ignore these letters, the texts, the voicemails, the encounters on the streets- treat them as harsh words by people who didn't know Katsuki. Strangers. Now it felt... more personal. It felt like his armor was cracked and all the things he said to himself *before all of this*- that they were wrong about him, that they didn't know him, that being passionate about fighting didn't mean he was a monster. All the many, many things Katsuki had gotten into the habit of repeating like a desperate mantra, fell to the waste side.

Because now some of the things they said were true.

It was his fault All Might was gone.

It was his fault he'd been kidnapped.

All the damage at Kamino, the lives lost, the people who'd gotten hurt...

All because he hadn't been able to fight off the bastards, a paralyzing compression quirk used against his limbs, a hand around his neck.

People had died because of Katsuki.

Because he was weak.

It had been hard to ignore the constant harassment before, but he could do it. Primarily because the majority of it was all bullshit. Katsuki would prove them wrong. Now though... well hadn't some of those letters predicted something like this?

That Katsuki would cause other heroes to fall.

That people would get hurt because of Katsuki.

That Katsuki was toxic to be around.

Now Katsuki felt as if all of his armor had been stripped away and he

was left bare and exposed for every jibe and shove and taunt that came his way like a rusted, jagged knife someone has heated Because Katsuki had been wrong in the absolute worst way possible and he didn't know how to react or what to do about it.

It was like whiplash. Rather than dismissing them, he found himself considering each one. Wondering if they were true. And it was hard. It was like ripping his legs and arms out of already hardened cement to pull his mind away from the claims and taunts and to tell himself no. That it was ridiculous. They didn't apply to him. It wasn't him. *That* wasn't him. What they said was the person he was and he wouldn't... he wouldn't do those things...

He was lost. Putting one foot in front of the other in order to keep moving forward. But with each day he felt more and more outside of his body. Like a puppet was pulling his strings and he was observing from an outside view. An unpleasant cotton like feeling in his head that had taken over in the days after he's been brought home.

A police officer comes by. Not Tsukauchi. He asks Katsuki a bunch of questions and Katsuki is dutiful about answering them to the best of his ability. He doesn't bring the texts up though. It seems irrelevant now. He doesn't bring up the pictures.

He doesn't want to admit he knew.

He doesn't want to admit how couplable he was in the face of his own kidnapping.

They already know, the letters whispered, WE already know how guilty you are. Everyone knows what you've done even if they don't know what you haven't done.

Didn't come forward.

Didn't fight hard enough.

Wasn't strong enough.

Wasn't smart enough.

Your fault.

All Might arrived in his home on a sunny day with Aizawa dressed the

same way he had when he'd been broadcasted on the television.

Looking like a skeleton, a husk of a man, face downturned and serious as he and Aizawa talk about protections and safeguards and Dorms. His mom, as per usual, doesn't miss an opportunity to insult him. To blame him.

"If you hadn't been so damn weak then you never would have been caught and caused all that trouble!"

His fault.

No one denied the claim. Not his father. Not Aizawa. Not All Might. Everyone knew that what had happened in Kamino was Katsuki's fault. That if he had fought harder, been stronger, better, then none of this would have happened.

"The dorms? Actually, we're grateful. Katsuki's fearless and good at everything he tries, especially since he's got that stupid awesome quirk."

As if Katsuki had never put in a day of work in his life.

As if everything he'd accomplished was handed to him.

"People were always fawning over him whether he deserved it or not." His mom shoots him a hard look. "It's probably why he ended up like *this*."

This.

Like he was a diseased animal or something.

"He's a hot-tempered brat and we know he's a pain. Please train him hard and make him a good hero."

She reaches forward and pushes him down into a bow, fingers tight in his hair and Katsuki stares down at the wooden floor.

'We know.' 'We're grateful.'

Katsuki had fought hard not to look at his dad. To accept that both his parents were happy to get rid of him. There was a numbness to it all. The dissociation got worse from that point on. What was he supposed to do?! How was he supposed to make anything better?

He'd already been trying his hardest to be a hero.

He'd been putting his whole heart into his schoolwork and hero training and into that image he'd held in his head of All Might. Of always moving forward, facing the odds no matter how bad it looked, fighting until every bad guy had been taken down.

And he'd failed.

Time after time after time.

The first exercise against Deku.

The Sport's Festival where Icyhot hadn't even bothered to try against him, had looked at Katsuki like he was nothing. A hollow win that mocked him.

A farce of an internship where Katsuki never seemed to be doing the right thing.

Deku stealing his moves.

An exam where he passed out and wasn't even awake for the win. Breaking himself fighting against All Might and being less than nothing to the man, to his hero.

Targeted by Villains.

Kidnapped.

All Might's final battle.

Katsuki curls into himself as he watches Aizawa and All Might enter the car. The lie All Might had told him, about Deku being just one of his precious students sits between them like salt on a wound. Of course. Who did Katsuki think he was? Why would the man tell *him* of all people anything?!

He was nothing.

Katsuki stumbles into the house, blinking slowly as he walks past his parents and up to his room. It's hard to breathe and he forces air passed the giant rock that feels lodged into his lungs. He leans against his door shakily and folds into himself until his knees are nudged beneath his chin.

From here, he can see the container of letters under his bed.

It makes hot tears come to his eyes and Katsuki buries his face in his

knees. He hears the soft *buzz, buzz, buzz* of his phone going off again. Somewhere in that mess, Kirishima might have sent him something, but he doesn't want to check, doesn't want to look at all.

He's so tired.

UA has been one failure after another. And Deku, of all people, was flourishing. The kid who'd nerded out for the entirety of their childhood but who had never done anything about it. Had never gone to the gym or jogged or bothered to learn fighting techniques outside of watching Katsuki. The guy who talked about heroes, but who'd never proved on any level that he was committed to becoming one. The meek son of a bitch who, up until the day he tried to save Katsuki from the Sludge Villain, had always backed down and shied away and freaked out over conflict of any kind.

All Might had chosen Deku.

The man had known, obviously, right from the start which one of them had what it took. He'd been able to see the failure Katsuki seemed destined to be, the monster lurking beneath the surface.

He'd admired All Might more than anything. Had strived to be that person. Never losing. Moving forward. Never backing down no matter the odds. Yet everything he was had been wrong. All Might had taken in Deku's meekness, a tiny shrimp who went on and on about All Might's smile and his recues and who chose to run than fight in their final exam.

Had Katsuki gotten everything wrong?

Had he completely missed what All Might stood for?

If so then what did that mean for Katsuki? All these years... striving and working and clawing his way to the top to be a hero. And no one wanted him to be one. No one. It was the path he'd chosen and worked for, even Aizawa sensei had admitted that no one was working harder to be a hero than Katsuki.

But did his teacher think he *deserved* to be one?

If his hard work and passion and single minded focus were wrong. Then what was the right answer? All these people who insisted Katsuki was made of the wrong stuff, that he was too angry and aggressive and loud, they never bothered to say what was the right stuff.

Deku was, apparently.

Should Katsuki even be a hero then?

The idea of being anything else left a void inside of him. If he couldn't be a hero then... then that was it. The concept felt lopsided as if he was trying to push a triangle into a square hole. It was impossible. It was all or nothing only Katsuki had never considered what nothing might be.

A life of shame and humiliation, for one. He couldn't face anyone if he failed. Not after all of this. With a frighteningly empty realization, like a strike of lightning, Katsuki recognized that if he failed to be a hero then he didn't want to live.

If he continued to fail at UA and if he didn't make it as a hero, then there was nothing left. His mom seemed hell-bent on reminding him how much he was wrong. His dad loved him, but in the end, Katsuki wasn't the top priority. If something happened and he failed, would they even take him back?

The world itself seemed to despise him on a fundamental level and the idea of venturing out to be something other than a hero left a panicked, achy feeling in his chest. A pressure on his heart.

Even before the kidnapping, Katsuki had avoided going out. He'd avoided interacting with anyone who didn't go to UA.

Now...

Katsuki clenched the spot over his heart as he tried to beat it into submission, to make the sharp pain go away through sheer force of will. At this point, he felt like the most hated person in Japan, one box had turned into four beneath the space of his bed. His phone had daily messages coming through, hourly on a bad day, and online was a hell hole he didn't want to think about.

Would it stop if he gave up? Would the letters stop coming? The text messages? Would people stop writing articles about him if he just disappeared? Got some low key job in some no-name company where the employees didn't recognize him. Would people stop harassing him, bumping into him, taunting him on the streets if he waved a white flag in surrender?

There's no good answer.

And no one he can ask about any of it.

He's alone in this.

When he finally has his breath under control, he surveys the room and realizes that he has to start packing. He's going to be living with his classmates. The people who Katsuki hurt in his efforts to keep things quiet.

He starts with the books.

"Kat! You've got mail!" His dad's voice comes up from the stairs.

He's down on the first floor even as his father is turning back towards the kitchen. Startling the man who nearly jumps out of his skin. The old man blinks rapidly at him, taking in his son before gesturing to the table.

Katsuki recognizes the meticulous handwritten letter immediately, sitting innocently on the table. He stares at it blankly for a very long moment, unwilling to actually believe that the therapist would send him something even after all of this.

His disbelief does not, in fact, change the status of the letter's existence and he notices with a certain chagrin that it's heavier than the last five or so. Heavy letters, as he learned the hard way, were never good.

The last heavy letter had a thong in it that had been oddly scented.

The one before that had photos of dead cats.

He wasn't sure which one disturbed him more, but he'd developed a very healthy wariness of anything that weighed more than a postcard.

The letter's existence also brings another issue to his attention though. His dad gestures for him to sit down and it's only now that he notices that there are two teacups sitting on the table. Jasmine wafts up and it looks like a touch of honey has already been added. There's a line of stickiness down the side of the container that Katsuki picks up and wipes off before it can dry and catch him off guard next time he grabs it...

And then it strikes him that there won't be a next time.

He's out of time.

The truck from UA is coming this afternoon for his stuff.

Masaru, whose been watching him the whole time, hands over a platter of red bean cakes, draped in honey.

"You hate a mess," his dad says fondly, a chuckle in his voice as he adds. "Your classmates are going to drive you insane. Nineteen teenagers who probably don't know what side of a hamper to put their dirty laundry into."

Katsuki shrugs.

He hasn't really thought about his classmates much at all. He's been avoiding it these last few weeks. Only sending out enough texts to assure the squad doesn't smash the door down frantically looking for his corpse.

He cuts a piece from the cake and savors the smooth taste. Wondering when he'll be able to have this again. Just him and his dad together enjoying the peace. He looks at the letter and shoves it into his back pocket. It doesn't fold, instead, his fingers feel something round inside. Hard as rock.

It brings him back to the issue at hand though.

"Listen, you're probably going to be getting my mail for a bit before the address change kicks in," Katsuki said slowly.

"I'll make sure you get it," his dad is quick to say.

Katsuki grimaces.

Yeah, that's not what he's worried about.

"It's..." Fuck, this was hard. "I've been..."

His dad, ever patient, ever quiet, watches him with wide, expectant eyes behind those thick-rimmed glasses. How the fuck is he supposed to tell his dad that sometimes little envelopes arrive with underwear in it? That sometimes there's pictures of Katsuki in the streets or walking to school with threats written on the back? That there's sometimes drawings of Katsuki that are not... that are not of good things.

His hands clench around the teacup.

“Katsuki?”

Soft.

Caring.

Worried.

‘I need you to throw them away without looking at them.’ Brings up about ten red flags. He worries his bottom lip as he tries to navigate this shit show with a modicum of grace he doesn’t possess.

“I’ve been getting *a lot* of letters from people.” He starts out.

His father beams at him. Pats him on the back.

“I understand. You’re turning out to be a great Hero Katsuki, I’m not surprised.”

His throat goes drier than a desert.

‘I can’t do it.’

His mom would have understood immediately. Had seen one of them herself. She would have, rightly, assumed they weren’t good. And doesn’t *that* sting in a really awful way. His dad doesn’t consider him bad. His dad has never doubted that he’ll be a hero. His dad supports him and in that moment the idea of him knowing the truth feels like ripping his heart from his chest and grinding it under his heel.

He hurriedly wipes the beginning of wetness from his eyes as he refuses to look at his dad. Masaru chuckles, seeming to take his actions as embarrassment rather than shame. A hand touches his shoulder and squeezes reassuringly.

“No worries, Katsuki, I’ll make sure they’re sent to the right address. I won’t peak.” His dad winks. “Though I do want you to find your first fan mail in that pile of yours so I can laminate it and put it on the wall.”

“Thanks,” he croaks, because he’s drowning in equal measures of humiliation of the truth and the love his dad is trying to exude. This is why he could never really be honest with the man. The idea of disappointing him would utterly crush him.

His dad might be a coward.

But he was also the only person who had never looked at him like he was the bad guy.

“I love you,” his dad says, voice quiet.

“I know. I love you too.”

He feels the man wrap his arms around him. Pull him close, kiss his forehead, hold him there for a long second.

Then he lets go.

“I... I have a card for you,” Masaru stutters. He pulls out what looks like a credit card. It’s black with a little skull in the corner. He grabs Katsuki’s hand and forces him to take it. “It’s not connected to our accounts. It’s a start-up for you. The money I had saved up for the apartment, I put it all on there. A little more than ten thousand. It will help pay for a down payment on your first apartment after you graduate and any little things you want or need until then.”

His dad has tears in his eyes.

“Dinner... during the winter holidays, I want to take you out. I know you won’t want to come home but let me do that. Please?”

“Of course, old man, we can go out every night if you want.”

Masaru tears up more, lips pressed together.

“It’s not the end, you know. I’ll be around for whatever you need. I’ll... we’re still a family. You can call me anytime.”

Katsuki grimaces.

His phone sits in his pocket and he figures this is as good a time as any.

“Actually... I...” He pulls out his phone and puts it on the table. “I think it would be better if I left this here. I don’t want it.”

A hand reaches forward and grabs his own. Large and cold, soft. So unlike Katsuki’s calloused well worn fingers. Designer hands. Used to holding pencils and pens and standing before large grafting paper for hours on end. Doing paperwork and sewing, the worst he worries about is stabbing his finger with the needle when he wants to do it by hand.

They hear Mitsuki's car pull up.

"I'll talk to her, make sure she doesn't do anything to drag you out of school or back home," Masaru says warily.

"Thank you." For a moment their silent, as they listen to her move about in her office. "When do you think she'll realize...?"

The old man shrugs.

"Probably not until she's preparing the house for you to come home for the holidays."

"You're not going to talk to her about it then, at all?"

He's not surprised. His dad has never been good at confronting Mitsuki about anything.

"It's not like you have either," Masaru muttered under his breath.

Touché.

"I don't know when I'll get a phone plan," Katsuki warns him.

"We'll figure it out"

His dad says the words so firmly. He doesn't question or argue with him leaving the phone behind. He doesn't judge Katsuki or say he's wrong for what he's doing. He doesn't try to convince Katsuki that this is his home or strong-arm Katsuki into trying to do what he wants.

The same soft personality that was willing to speak up for Katsuki over the years, but who was never able to actually stand up for him is what helps Katsuki close up this part of his life in such a neat little box.

He takes his tea and the cake upstairs just as the door downstairs opens. The letter comes out and hits his desk as he decides if it's a good idea to open it. Maybe he should wait until he's at school. At least if it's bad he can go for a jog on campus. Instead of trapped in the house like he is.

'Just face it.'

He rips it open. A metal open ring falls onto the desk. Black. Smooth. It's heavy. Feels like it's made of stone. There are small sliver slits along its length on the inside. A tiny, almost impossible to see crease

near the opening of the ring.

He picks up the letter.



Dear Katsuki Bakugou

I've contacted the Hero Public Safety Commission with my recommendations. They too were concerned about your aggressive behavior and fear further attempts of Villains targeting you again due to your lack of demonstrative improvement. Included in this letter is a directive from HPSC Officer Yukumiru Mera highly recommending my services to you to improve your overall behavior and discipline.

As of right now, this is not mandatory, however, the Hero Public Safety Commission is hosting the next Hero License Exam in one month's time and it is our understand that UA intends to submit all applicable student's for eligibility. Including yourself. You have one month in improve yourself and pass the exam, but in the case that you fail, you will be required to undergo my suggested treatment and sessions with me twice a week.

Included in this letter is a therapeutic device for your benefit. It is up to you whether you wish to use is to your advantage but know that if you are required to start sessions with me, it will be a mandatory part

of your treatment plan. It can be worn either around your wrist or ankle. It is quirk created on I-island, using both the latest in scientific discovery and applicable quirk evolution. Simply put it on and it will put out a steady white pulse to show it is on.

Taking into consideration your specific issues, we have designed the ring to emit a small shock any time your voice raises to unreasonable levels or there is a worrying amount of aggressive chemicals in your brain activity. Brain structures involved in making moral judgements are often damaged in violent individuals. Neurobiology targeting inappropriate aggressive behavior has been carefully installed so that if an individual's adrenaline, stress endorphins, and noradrenaline are all exhibiting high levels- indicating high aggression, you will receive a harsher shock to your system as a means of reminding you to calm down.

We all only wish the best for you.

Dr. Himari Kobayashi

Katsuki laughed.

He covered his mouth and bent over as the wheezing sound escaped in an ugly manner, cracking his voice as it wound its way up his throat. He banged his fist against the wooden desk and his forehead touched down right next to the ring.

That was so fucked.

Holy shit man, was there a 'nope' button big enough for his life? He laughed harder, clutching his stomach as he tried to regain his breath and failed. The ugly wheezing turning into snorts.

He dumped the ring and letter unceremoniously on top of the pile of letters before shutting the box, sealing it with tape and writing **Katsuki Bakugou** obnoxiously across the top with a skull for good measures.

When the truck arrived not long after, it found Katsuki standing in front of his house with three suitcases and a box.

“Are you sure that’s all you want to bring with you?” The man asked.

“Fuck yeah it is. It’s all I need.”

Black Letters and Missed Texts

Chapter Summary

The Provisional License Exam is fast approaching and Katsuki is determined to not fail as he prepares in the middle of adjusting to living at the dorms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 7: Black Letters and Missed Texts

It's been eleven days since everyone moved into the dorms and he's fallen into a nice routine.

The dorms are quiet in the middle of the night. The common room abandoned except for maybe the odd visit from Tokoyami or Shoji. Natural night owls. The first couple of times they see him working on schoolwork at one in the morning they do a double-take because everyone knows he goes to bed at a little past eight.

His classmates have made fun of him for it. Calling him an old man and hackling him about ruining his bad boy reputation. As if Katsuki has ever tried to be 'the bad boy.' He's only been himself. There's never been a reputation he's wanted to protect. Despite what most people might think.

So yeah, he goes to sleep early, but he never stays asleep.

He wakes up alert and crouching by his bed from the tiniest of noises, looking around like a deranged lunatic with a racing heart and the feel of things inside his chest, around his neck, metal encircling his face, his hands, straps holding him down, something invading his mouth, seeping into him and filling him up. Spilling out.

He learned a long time ago that to keep your body at top peak, sometimes you have to do odd things to cater to it. His mind is fucking with him and won't let him sleep? Go to bed early. Get up. Shake it off. Do some work. Don't let it get to you. Never let it get to you. A cup of warm milk with a little bit of cinnamon mixed in, maybe a few digestible, distract the mind with mathematics or English

or Heroics... just enough that when he lays down at four or five he can sleep an additional three hours before having to get up.

It works.

He gets anywhere from 6-8 hours of sleep and yeah, the squad makes fun of him for going to bed so early and rising so late, but he's fine with that. Dandy, in fact, because it means the night owls haven't said anything.

He doesn't thank them in words.

Not his style.

But he does make a little extra food every once and a while and place it in front of them without a word. They don't make a big deal of it and neither does he. A nice little thing they have going.

There's a large track around the whole of the campus. About five miles from the school to the USJ, another three miles around training grounds alpha, beta, gama and finally, two miles stretching around all of the dorms for all the years and classes. A ten-mile run he does every day after getting back from classes that clears his head. Just him and his music. The pleasant burn of his muscles and lungs as he lets everything just... exist.

And mailboxes.

They line one wall and have a small designation for each person with a key. A key Katsuki wears when he goes jogging every day so that he can grab it on his way back. He slides it in with a grimace, turning the key and already, he feels the weight of letters pushing the little door open. He's quick to grab them. His nose wrinkling in anger and a thin line stretching his lips.

They'd been there only for four days when letters started appearing in his box. UA was efficient in this, apparently. He's glad. Because it means his dad won't have to deal with his stuff coming in. He's also aggravated and a little wary because eventually he's going to be doing long term internships and he doesn't trust anyone at the dorms to grab his mail and not get nosy.

"Whoah! What the hell Bakubro, Fanbase much? How do you already have that many letters? You don't get bills yet!" Kaminari walked up to him, grin on his face.

Case and fucking point.

He doesn't know what to say so he chooses not to acknowledge the question at all, instead, stuffing the letters in the large hoodie pouch he's wearing.

"Don't be like that! I want to read one," Kaminari whined, forgoing his own mail to bother Katsuki. "Are they gym memberships begging for you to renew? Kirishima's local gym manager was devastated when he canceled. Ashido has all these magazines- hip hop, dance, girly stuff, hero stuff. It's kind of ridiculous."

"You're kind of ridiculous," Katsuki snapped. "Go get your mail instead of shoving your nose into mine."

"You know, an attitude like that just makes me think your *hiding something*," Kaminari said in a sing-song voice, waggling his eyebrows. "I'd think it was an angry ex-lover if you weren't so, well, unlovable."

Katsuki stumbles.

He rights himself quickly.

Kaminari had said it in a teasing tone and a dismissive shrug, but the last word still rings like a cannon going off directly next to his ear.

"...offers by agencies?"

Katsuki blinks back into focus, looking at Kaminari who was looking at him expectantly as if waiting for an answer. There's an easy grin on the other's face. No maliciousness at all. He knows the idiot isn't thinking when he talks, but fucking hell, even Katsuki isn't that free with *those* kinds of insults.

"What?" Katsuki's voice comes out higher than normal and he mentally curses, but Kaminari doesn't seem to have noticed at all.

"I asked if its intern stuff. Heroes asking you to work with them." Kaminari's voice is exasperated, but the grin still persists and he has his hands behind his back in a casual manner. Relaxed.

"It's 'none of your fucking business' stuff," Katsuki mumbles. "And quit asking! Your voice is too annoying for you to be impersonating a broken record, dunce face."

"How do you manage to fit three insults into such a simple sentence,"

Kaminari whined. "If you're going to be a mean jerk, the least you could do is be a dumb mean jerk."

"You already absorbed all of the idiocy in the room. There's none left for me."

Katsuki opens the door, holding it wide for Sparks who strolls by him with an eye roll.

"Okay, I walked into that one, but seriously dude, chill out! Come have fun with us! Unclench those butt cheeks! Loosen those tight muscles of yours! You're going to have a lot of medical problems in the future if you don't relax, at least a teeny, tiny little bit."

"Relaxing is why your last place in class," Katsuki muttered.

"I like to think it's because I have ridiculously smart classmates," Kaminari quipped. "My grades aren't terrible, I just have shit luck, I bet if I was in 1B then I'd be in the middle of the pack."

He wasn't wrong.

Despite the fact that the school claimed the people who passed the entrance exam for the Heroes course had been split up evenly in scores, there was a distinct line between them. They had gotten both students recommended to UA and both of them were in the top five. The Finals of the Sports Festival had only been made up of Class 1A members. The two 1B members making it to the Pre-finals had been below average. The green chick only making it passed Kaminari because of possibly the worst matchup in history for an electric user. Fucking idiot shouldn't have pulled out his best move without even knowing what the fucking opponent's quirk was and he deserved to lose for that. Academic wise, they had pulled way ahead too, so Kaminari probably really would have been in the middle of the pack if he'd been placed in 1B instead of 1A. Still...

"Don't compare yourself to losers and think you're great," Katsuki snapped. "You need to ace something other than English, dumb ass, just because you don't like a subject doesn't mean you should be neglecting it."

"Why are you such a nag," Kaminari muttered. "Seriously, you're supposed to be the bad boy of 1A, not the closeted nerd mother Henning us to death."

"I'll kill you."

“Only after I get my grades up and do all my chores, apparently.”

Katsuki shot off a mini-explosion that Kaminari dodged, cackling and running away.

“No quirk use inside, please!” Four-eyes voice sounded from further down the hall. Katsuki snorted, shoving his hands into his pockets as he trudged into the elevator to his own dorm room.

He pulled out the letters.

One letter had a return address that simply read ‘Concerned Road,’ definitely fake which meant that one was going to be really nasty. A few official letters. He knew to be wary of those but he’d have to open them up just in case it was actually important. There was one letter that was written in a child’s crayon. He opened that one, staring at the flame breathing blonde-haired monster devouring what looked like people, red below to represent what was probably supposed to be blood.

Creative.

There had been a company who had discreetly tried to recruit him as a mercenary of sorts when he graduates. They’d called it ‘bodyguard’ duty, but the rest of the letter had screamed shadiness and Katsuki made note of the company and names involved to investigate when he finally gets his hero license.

A few Villains had made offers as well with ways to contact them. He’d considered giving these to Aizawa but that also meant that 1) he’d have to admit other bad guys other than the LoV were trying to recruit him and 2) he’d have to show him the other ones because he wasn’t going to outright lie to Aizawa when he asked.

There was a black envelope with pink lettering that he’d bet good money had something very sexual in it that would make him sick, so he was definitely avoiding opening that one up. The last black envelope he’d opened had been someone with a pedophilia kink who’d wanted to take pictures with him. He’d scrubbed everything until his whole body had been raw after reading the first few sentences.

A few Hero agencies that were criticizing him for being ‘involved’ with the LoV and were ‘not fooled’ like UA was. Some that were blaming him (again) for All Might’s retirement. Some that were genuine letters of condolences for being the reason for All Might’s

retirement. Some that were outright threats for All Might's retirement.

Katsuki made it to his room and kicked one of the boxes under his bed out, half-hazardly throwing the letters into the box and kicking it with too much force back underneath the bed. He pulled out his textbook, opening it up to the latest chapter to revise in the places he'd highlighted.

Time moved forward. As it always did. Not sluggish and slow, as some people complained about. But barreling forward, too fast, as it always did for him. Disappearing between his fingers as if he was standing still.

He's working but not hard enough, not fast enough, it feels, to keep up with his classmates. He's studying and yet it still feels as if he's not using his time wisely. It makes the headache at the back of his head, always present now, feel more alive, like it's trying to consume him.

When the knock sounds, it shocks him. His highlighter slides right, making an unpleasant arc over the next page that's surely going to drive him crazy later. He feels himself twitch as he looks over at the door, noting the darkness outside. 7:00 pm reads across the clock above his bed and he realizes he should take a shower and get ready for sleep.

The knock comes again.

He stands, feeling irritation pull through him, but also curiosity. It's too polite and quiet for anyone from his squad and Deku's knock is always fast, as if he's garnering the courage to actually do it and overcompensates. Iida's is always accompanied by a booming announcement with his random door to door reminders. Todoroki, on the rare occasion he thinks he needs to tell someone, knocks, tells Katsuki what it is he's there for, and then leaves. Like an in-person text message.

Katsuki opens the door to the downturned, cranky face of Aizawa.

He opens the door wider immediately, letting his teacher slump into the room, eyes looking over the sparsely decorated area. His brows furrow before looking at the bed, eyeing the textbook and notes before finally landing on Katsuki's face.

"You missed a dorm meeting. I sent a voicemail out to everyone hours ago. If you want to ignore your classmates, fine, but I expect you to at least check your phone to make sure it isn't an emergency. The dorms

could have been on fire or a dorm mate might have needed your help. If you want to be a hero, you should always be up to date and ready to move. There could very well have been evacuation work needed nearby and you would have missed out.”

Katsuki takes the reprimand for what it is; a small warning to be more responsible and nods in acceptance.

“My phones destroyed. I need to get a new one and haven’t had the time yet.” The eyebrows raise higher, but Aizawa doesn’t question him on how that might have happened. “What did I miss?”

“New rules.”

Katsuki is handed a piece of paper, raising his brows at restrictions on using the blender at Midnight and other odd things.

“I know you all are not used to living without your parents and living with a large group of people, so no one is in trouble and I’m not angry,” Aizawa starts off, like he practiced this speech. “I’m learning things as we go too and I’m sure I’ll be adding new rules to this list as we continue. If there is anything I can do for you, whether it be for your specific quirk or just concerns you have, feel free to come and talk to me and we’ll figure things out.”

Katsuki nods.

He’s not worried about it. He’s been cooking and cleaning for himself for years. All the little things about taking care of himself, he’s already figured out or asked his dad how to do. The man would fuss over him and worry, always cooking extra meals before he and the Hag would leave on one trip or another. As their design business took off and really started booming, they’d needed to take more and more trips across and out of the country.

He’s already done all the dumb things.

Like adding too much soap to the washer.

Burning a pan because he forgot to turn off the heat on the oven.

Forgetting to turn off the lights at night and being yelled at for the electricity bill.

Letting the trash sit too long until there was a smell he couldn’t get rid of even when he took it out and scrubbed the kitchen floors.

He's seeing his classmates struggling with those things and wears a smug smile on his face as he does it perfectly in front of them. Because they'll never fucking know he's already done this phase. [The look on Yaoyorozu's face when he folded his clothes perfectly in a matter of minutes as she tried with frazzled hair and rumbled clothes to do the same still puts a smile on his face.] The wrinkled uniform the next day in class had him coughing into his hand to hide his laugh.

He's a petty bitch and winning at life taste just as good as winning in the classroom or on the field.

He's had his quirk under control for years now too.

He knows how to wash his clothes to make sure the nitroglycerin doesn't turn into a bomb. The products to wash his body to make sure nothing is leaking into the pipes. The sheets to use to keep the chemicals from sinking into the mattress over time. The crack to leave in his window and the fan to position so when he sparks off the smoke will leave in a safe manner instead of leaving ashes on the ceiling.

Katsuki, unlike his classmates, has his shit handled.

"I think I'm good," Katsuki tells Aizawa. The man's deadpan eyes dig into him for a long moment, looking him up and down for too long.

"I know you have the practical stuff down," Aizawa tells him, "but my door is open for the people stuff too. If you're having a hard time adjusting to living with twenty other individuals..."

Katsuki waves his hand in a dismissive gesture.

"My dorm room is more than big enough for me. I deal with them as much as I did when I lived at my house."

That is apparently not what Aizawa was looking for because the man's face twitches, and his eyes narrow in that 'you done fucked up' way of his.

"Avoiding your classmates isn't actually a form of coping."

Katsuki shrugs.

"I'm not actively avoiding them," he points out. "I just keep myself busy. I have a routine and the extras aren't part of that routine."

Aizawa's eyes look over at his bed with the textbook on it again.

“Bakugou,” the man said slowly, voice even, but eyes piercing.
“Outside of training and hero work, what else do you do?”

He feels the trick question in the air. He knows Aizawa is looking for something, but Katsuki can't see what that something is.

“Hike. Cook. Read.” He shrugs gesturing to his shelves of books.

Aizawa looks at the spines, humming to himself.

“Assholes- a Theory?” His teacher reads off, raising an eyebrow at him.

Katsuki shrugs.

“A gag gift, but it's pretty fucking funny.”

“One Hundred Deadly skills.” Aizawa reads off. “World War Z. Feed. Warm Bodies. Husk.”

“Not really a fan of horror, but I love Zombie books,” Katsuki says, unapologetically.

Aizawa grunts, but there's an amused upturn to his lips.

“Alright, as long as you aren't purposefully isolating yourself, it's fine.

“Purposefully... what the fuck?”

Aizawa pats his shoulder.

“You're hard to read, kid. I don't know if you're an introvert who's happy with the way things are or an extravert whose just really bad at socializing.”

“I'm perfectly fucking fine at socializing.”

“Uh huh, just do me a favor and *try* to put some time aside to just be a kid, okay? Go play some video games with your classmates or teach them how to cook or something. Just get out of this room for the purpose of interacting with other human beings. Even Todoroki is in the common room from time to time.”

With his piece said the man left. Closing the door in the same quiet manner as when he first arrived. Katsuki sits on his bed, looking down at the list of rules and smiles a little bit. He pulls his laptop towards him and pulls out the card his dad had given him.

He hasn't really had a reason to get a new phone or sign up for a plan. All his classmates are right fucking there and he'd already warned his dad it might be a while before he has a new one. But there's something about disappointing Aizawa, probably the only adult who gets him and respects his wants, that leaves him feeling a little panicky.

So he orders a basic Android with a pay as you go plan. Emergency use. None of that extravagant shit. He changes his phone number on the dumb ass board they have up in the living room that lists Allergies and relevant shit they might need to know about each other.

Just to be an ass he puts 'Stupidity and chocolate' next to his name on the allergy list. After a second he adds +Deku.

He wished he had a camera for the moment the nosy stalker read this.

He can practically see Round cheeks reading it over Deku's shoulder, patting the shitty nerd consolingly while Four Eyes reads it in disapproval. His squad will think it's hilarious though.

He goes back up to his room to finish chapter 11 on the basic medical check-up before moving a rescue. It's his weakness. Rescues. So he wants to make sure he has every fact memorized. Maybe the shits won't like him, but they'll be fucking safe in his hands.

It's not just the Hero courses that have had to move into the dorms. The General Studies and Business Studies and Support Tech specialists have all had dorms set up all around Campus. Katsuki tries to avoid these people as much as possible.

He can feel their eyes watching him whenever he goes to the cafeteria.

He hears their whispers in the halls.

Sero heard them once. His little squad has a tendency to talk his ear off when they walk with him and that has the great benefit of overwhelming the whispers that follow Katsuki around. On this one occasion though it had just been Sero with him.

"I can't believe they allowed that monster back into the school," someone whispered. Just loud enough for the two of them to overhear.

Sero had stopped, brows furrowed in confusion as he glanced at the Business students. Katsuki hadn't paused though, hooking Sero by the elbow and forcing him to continue walking.

"We wouldn't have to live on campus if it wasn't for him," the other whispered loudly in response, a pointed look at Bakugou this time.

Sero tried to stop. A look of fury overtaking his features, but Katsuki's grip tightened.

"What the fu..."

Katsuki yanked.

Sero stumbled as he turned to Katsuki, looking shaken and angry.

"Drop it," Katsuki hissed. He still hadn't paused. They were almost to the classroom now and Sero was finally walking with him rather than being dragged along like a particularly stretched out rag doll.

"Bakugou, what was that?!" Sero hissed in his ear. "When did that start?!"

Katsuki shrugs.

"Doesn't matter. They're just a bunch of no-name extras. They don't mean anything."

"That's not an answer," Sero hissed back, looking even more upset.

"That's so fucked up! They can't just go around calling you..."

"You were almost late," Aizawa's deadpan voice called out, watching them as Katsuki physically dragged Sero into the classroom. "Get to your seats."

Sero's mouth clamped shut.

The Provisional Hero Licensing Exam is announced. Just like the crazy therapist woman said. It is a few weeks out. They start prepping their Ace moves and Katsuki wants to roll his eyes. Katsuki already has these types of moves. He's already prepared. Using his explosions to create blinding light. His howitzer. He's been sketching out ideas for his quirk for years though and with full reign to experiment as much as he likes and to try dangerous shit out, there's a world of opportunity here.

His routine has been a bit crazy.

He cranked it up again.

Katsuki trains until there's black spots in front of his eye. He takes his books with him everywhere. Popping them open when his arms are too weak to keep blowing shit up and his legs are wobbly from practicing landings. He studies, eats, and drinks water until he feels good enough to do more.

Katsuki is hard working. He never gives up. Those two things sit warm in his chest and he needs to prove that they're true. Katsuki is hardworking and he never gives up. It's his core. It's the only thing that no one can say shit about. They're the only things in years that people still say about him that are good.

Katsuki is hard working.

He never gives up.

The squad has tried nearly every night to get him to hang out with them, but he's declined each time. They might want to slack off, but he won't. He can't. He has to prove all those fuckers wrong.

Katsuki is going to be a hero.

If that means studying while he eats and going through law regulations while he flips around a stone peak as he flies, then that's what he's going to fucking do. Social crap is for those with the time to do so.

He ignores the increasingly worried looks he's getting.

They don't know what's at stake.

They don't know.

None of his classmates have anything to prove. Everyone thinks *his classmates* are hero material. And here Katsuki falters a bit as he's grabbing a quick dinner while the others sit down to watch a movie.

He scans them uncertainly.

Could they have gotten the types of letters Katsuki had?

The thought is a lot like falling through ice on a pond when you didn't know the pond was there because it was covered in snow. He knows Sero had been told by people on his way to school to 'Don't worry about it' after the Sport's Festival. He knows Deku hadn't

received any offers despite his strong showing because he'd gone and broken half his bones in the tournament.

Had Iida received any backlash for wearing his opponent's merch?

Had Ojiro gotten any grief for withdrawing from the tournament?

Or the girls for falling for that stupid prank?

It bothers him that he doesn't know. It bothers him *more* that he wants to know. It's none of his business. He should respect their privacy and not be a goddamn hypocrite. There is a small part of him that worries though.

His classmates are more... sensitive, they get upset by stupid shit. He doesn't think they'd handle it well. This stray thought is oddly reassuring though. He hasn't heard jack shit about anybody else dealing with this type of crap so chances are pretty high that they aren't.

It was the first thing his classmates had done, wasn't it? Sitting in the classroom and discussing the repercussions of it. Sero had outright stated what had happened to him without a moment's hesitation.

The Icyhot bastard had barely known Deku when he went and poured his bleeding heart out to the shitty nerd about his violin worthy backstory. The class was pretty open about any issues they came to. Everyone knew about Tokoyami's wariness of the night because of his lack of control over Dark Shadow. Aoyama's stomach issues.

Katsuki packs up the rest of what he's made and puts it in a container for later, doing the dishes with a touch more lightheartedness than before. They were fine. No one had done to them what they were doing to Katsuki. He was sure.

That didn't stop him from glancing at his classmate's mailboxes the very next day to make sure there weren't large piles waiting for them behind the little see-through glass doors or watching their faces carefully as they glanced at their phones for the next few days.

Just to be sure.

Katsuki hit the ground.

He rolls with it, coming to a stop against a rock wall behind him, getting his elbows and knees under him in less than a second. A tiny explosion helping him to his feet and facing Ectoplasm once more, but the man is holding up his hand.

“I think we’re done for the day,” the man announced.

Katsuki plants his feet and grits his teeth.

“You tired already!?” Katsuki demands. Which is a little ridiculous. He knows the man has been using his duplication quirk to train with all of his classmates, not just himself. But there’s still a disappointment that he’s losing his opponent. “Fine. I can get Sero to throw boulders at me then.”

“I don’t think so.”

Katsuki blinks as his teacher strides forward on the pointy prosthetics. He takes a step back, but his back immediately hits the wall. The teacher pauses at his actions and Katsuki immediately takes a step forward, away from the wall to make up for it.

“You’ve twisted your ankle.”

“So?” Katsuki blinks up at the man. “I can still fight.”

“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should. Taking care of yourself is also a priority.”

“I’ll get the ankle taken care of by Recovery Girl,” Katsuki grunts, wiping sweat from his face as he moves towards the edge. “I’ll be quick.”

“Bakugou,” Ectoplasm barks out. “The rest of your classmates have worked in sessions. A few hours here and there. You haven’t stopped all day outside of getting lunch. You’ve worked with Aizawa, Mic, and myself. I think its best if you call it a day.”

“Why should I care what the rest of my class is doing?” Katsuki demands. “I’m not them.”

He feels achy, but it's not to the point where he’s staggering. He’s worked hard to build up his stamina and he doesn’t see how it matters that his classmates haven’t worked on that department nearly as much. His breathing his heavy, but not labored.

“Our motto is to go beyond our limits,” Ectoplasm concedes, “but going beyond does not mean exceeding our body's needs. Rest and recuperation are also a necessary part of training. It gives our muscles time to heal and our mind time to process.”

There're no black spots yet. No dehydration. No swaying.

He feels frustrated at the demand to stop.

His body is still buzzing even if he is tired.

He knows there is no point in arguing though. He nods, conceding to the demand and bends down to hook his water bottle in his gloved hand. Taking a swig. Ectoplasm relaxes, though his eyes are still wary, watching him. Expecting him to what? What did the man fear? What did he think? The blank, almost mechanical looking face reveals less than even Aizawa's deceptive droopy-eyed expression.

Katsuki goes to Recovery Girl whose been watching from the sides, then does a short cool down exercise. Showers. Eats. Takes a short nap. Studies for a few hours on Proper Fire Evacuation Procedures and Taskforces. Then he does his ten miles around the campus.

Ectoplasm spots him as the man is leaving the central training center. The teacher stops and stares and waves for him to stop as Katsuki passes by. He pulls out his earbuds, the music still loud, so he pauses it.

“What are you doing?” Ectoplasm asks, and yeah, he hears the disapproval. The yellow eyes feel heavy as they almost glare at him. Katsuki looks down at himself, confused and wary because it's very obvious what he's doing and he doesn't understand what the issue is, but also... As a rule of thumb, Katsuki hates stupid questions.

“Painting my nails, obviously,” he watches as the teacher tilts his head examining Katsuki, those yellow eyes narrowing.

“I thought we agreed you were done for today,” Ectoplasm said reproachfully.

Four eyes zoomed past them, whipping the air in a breeze that unsettled his clothes and Ectoplasm's cloak.

“With special moves training, yeah,” Katsuki agreed, still confused.

Everyone was training extra hard.

Hell, Deku was doing his weird hands exercise thing at the dinner table, getting his gross ass sweat all over his dishware and possibly in his food. If Katsuki wanted to have easy movements in the air he had to focus more on dexterity, flexibility, and endurance training than buffing up like the shitty nerd and Kirishima.

He wanted to be more than just a powerhouse.

“You were supposed to be taking a break,” Ectoplasm put forward. “Not finding other ways to strain yourself.”

“I ate and took a shower and studied. I took a long ass break. I’m not overworking my body. I know how to maximize results without damaging myself.”

Ectoplasm eyed him warily.

“A mental break can be just as important to your health as a physical one,” Ectoplasm said carefully.

“Which is why I’m jogging,” Katsuki told him. “Listening to my music is my mental break. I just like to do something useful while I’m relaxing.”

Listening to his music while he jogs equates to Kaminari playing his video games. Katsuki taking the time to cook, to play around with ingredients, and come up with something new... that was the same as Ashido spending time copying dance moves on her youtube subscriptions. Katsuki just tried to find ways to make what he loved useful.

Jogging for endurance.

Cooking but with the intention of finding the healthiest dinners that fit his pallet for a balanced diet.

Ectoplasm eyed him, if the man had lips, he’d probably be frowning.

At that moment All Might walked out of the building.

Katsuki backed away in a hurry, waving to Ectoplasm even as the teacher sputtered and tried to gesture for him to come back. Katsuki was already moving again though, earbuds filling his head with music to drown out the sound of All Might calling out his name.

Katsuki had almost killed All Might.

Again.

The training exercise where he'd broken off the chunk of rock.
Knowing he wouldn't be fast enough. Screaming out All Might's name
with the last of his exhausted breath and seeing it toppling over.
Falling. Crashing. Killing.

Deku.

Green lightning spreading across his body as he uses Katsuki's own
moves to swing out into the open air. Leg smashing against the rock.
Small pieces raining down harmlessly across the area. And All Might.

All Might's proud, gaunt face.

The image of it kept repeating in his head. Over and over and over
again. He really was the symbol of destruction, wasn't he? He'd been
careless. Excited. Practicing his moves with no consideration of the
people around him.

He'd been too slow.

He'd frozen instead of reacting.

Fuck. Why had he frozen? Katsuki had never frozen before. Never. Not
once. But seeing All Might below him... fuck. Katsuki tugged on his
bracers. The only part of his costume he was wearing today. The
Exams were in a few days and Katsuki couldn't rest. He couldn't take
the chance that he would fuck up like that.

"Bakugou!" Kirishima was waving from the living room, hand on hip,
grinning at him. "Hey man, we've got some board games set up. You
want to join us? We're trying to relax a little before the exam. Get into
the right mindset, you know?"

"No."

The redhead's eyes looked him up and down.

"Come on man, you've been working nonstop. That can't be good for
you. You can't go into the exam all on edge."

"I'm not on edge," Katsuki rebuffed.

Ashido's head popped up from the couch.

“You're wound tighter than coil pressed between two slabs of cement, Blasty,” Horns told him, point-blank. “Everyone knows that you’re going to do fine on the Exam. There’s no need to be so uptight.”

Katsuki breathed through his nose.

Everyone knows.

Did they though? Katsuki was prepared for the exam. Sure. Could he pass it though? Could he get his provisional license?

If he failed...

If he failed...

If he failed...

The thought twisted around his throat and made it hard to breathe.

His classmates knew he'd be fine. But did they? Did they even think Katsuki deserved it? They had to be thinking it, didn't they? What everyone else in the world was thinking? That it was his fault All Might had been forced to retire. That it was his fault those people had died in Kamino. That it was his fault things had gone to hell at the camp. That they'd gotten hurt.

They knew better than anyone how much he'd fucked up.

These were the people who'd fought him at the Sport's festival.

These were the people who had been attacked at the camp because of him.

These were the people who were forced to change their whole lives for him, being forced to live in the dorms now because Katsuki hadn't come forward about being stalked by Villains.

They were the people who had to take this exam now because they were supposed to get these at the camp. They were supposed to be certified Semi-Pros by the Wild, wild pussycats team. They had been their proctors, even though he and his classmates hadn't known it at the time.

Katsuki had caused so much damage by being weak. An avalanche of one bad thing after another because he hadn't made the right calls, because he hadn't fought hard enough, hadn't been smart enough to get away.

Everyone knows.

There was a lot of things that everyone knew about Katsuki, but passing the exam sure as hell didn't feel like it was one of them. They'd been watching, he knows, when they think he can't see them. When they think he doesn't notice. Pity and judgment. Avoiding him and talking to him in a different way than before. More cautious.

Not one of them has said a word about the kidnapping.

One way or the other.

They've all avoided speaking about what happened. No one in his class has blamed him for moving into the dorms or the attack or Kamino. No one has said it wasn't his fault either. It's like a giant elephant in the room. A dividing wall between himself and them.

He's getting pictures now.

In the letters.

Of people who died in Kamino. Aunts and Fathers and Children and Old people who'd been left alone to die because no one knew they were in the buildings in the first place. Sometimes the letters are angry at him and sometimes they are filled with words of devastation.

All of them have said in one way or another that they wished the heroes hadn't gone to save Katsuki. That it was his fault these people were dead. Some of them begged Katsuki not to become a hero. Some of them threatened him. Some of them were just bitter statements, lashing out at Katsuki.

Katsuki's not sure what to do with the ugly black hole that's been opening in his chest. His heart hurts in a way that he doesn't know how to explain and no amount of running or exercise or hard work makes it go away.

Katsuki can't sit at that table with his classmates.

He can't relax.

He can't play whatever the fuck they're playing.

Because as long as he's working, being productive, then he can keep it all at bay. He can keep the black thing in his chest from consuming him. But if he relaxes. If he lets himself stop working then it starts to

take hold in a horrible way and Katsuki can't... He can't do that.

He has to prove himself first.

He has to prove that he can be a hero.

Once he passes the exam then he'll relax.

If he can just pass the exam, prove that he can be a hero, that he has what it takes, that he's not all bad and that he can do good then... then it will be easier to bear. He can deal with it then. And maybe this headache will go away. Maybe the gnawing pit inside of him will lesson to something that he can handle better.

He needs to prove to *himself* that he's doing the right thing.

"Bakugou?!"

He blinks. Hard. Kirishima comes into focus, blurry outlines coming into sharp contrast.

"You spaced out on us," Kirishima said, worry in his voice. "Mina asked if want the race car."

"I'm not playing," Katsuki denies. "I'm going out to work on my auto-cannon."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Sero called out. Now all eyes were on Katsuki and he felt himself hunching. "Dude... its been like... a month since we moved into the dorms, man. You don't come out of your room. You don't hang out with any of us. Hell, I don't even think Kirishima has seen what your dorm looks like and he's right next door! Like... theirs being an introvert and then there's isolation and that's what you're doing man. You cook and you train and you study and... like... look, man... we all know your hardcore and maybe you do relax in that room of yours but, I mean..."

"Even Tokoyami and Shoji and Todoroki come out and hang sometimes," Kaminari piped up. "Koda's been more vocal than you. You're practically a ghost!"

"It's none of your fucking business what I do with my free time," Katsuki snapped, turning away from them.

"Is this what you've always done then?" Kirishima called, stopping him. "You seemed pretty relaxed and more than willing to hang out at

I-island. I got you to come to the pool to hang out with us. This sure doesn't feel like you've always done this man. I'm your friend, aren't I? We're all your friends."

"Maybe next week," Katsuki relented.

"Next week when the exam is over..." Kirishima said knowingly. "Bakugou, you can't... this isn't right, man. This isn't good. I don't know what's going through your head right now, but working yourself into the ground..."

"Does it look like I'm in the ground?" Katsuki snapped. "I'm bringing my A-game to this Exam and I won't accept anything less."

"That's super manly," Kirishima said, but his normal passion wasn't behind the words. "Plus Ultra and all that, but there's a point where it starts to not be helpful anymore and your kind of there, man."

"How about just an hour?" Horns pushed, golden eyes set in black staring at him. "We can compromise. How about you just... hang out for one hour and then you can go do your stuff?"

Katsuki glanced outside, at dim lighting.

"It's probably going to rain soon. I want to get out there before that," Katsuki said, dismissively. "Maybe later."

He didn't miss the looks on their faces. Wariness. Concern. Resignation. He knew them though. They'd start playing their game and soon enough all thoughts of Katsuki would be long gone. They were the type to be fully in the present. They didn't overanalyze and brood like a certain group of fucking shitty nerds tended to. That was why he liked them so much. They cared, but they didn't obsess.

Katsuki turned

The air was humid and charged. Muggy, almost, a fog encroaching on the campus in spurts despite the end of summer sun trying to dispel it. It left the campus looking ominous. Alive.

Which meant most of the extras would be indoors. Definitely the General Ed students and Business students. There might be a tech student- that Hatsumi whatever the fucker her name is chick was a dedicated piece of shit Katsuki had come to respect so the chances of running into her out here was all a matter of crossing paths.

Katsuki felt the droplets of water leave dew on his skin as he found his normal training spots. Familiar burnt stumps left behind from his last session. He grinned as he got to work, pulling his gloves on.

The boom, boom, boom of his shots going off was satisfying, but they were still too far apart. His aim was off. Leaving random balls of nitro to spin too wide. The AP shot needed to hit the target 100% of the time. Any variation could leave targets outside of his scope to incur damage.

Here that meant planks of wood and random trees getting holes in them, but out in the field that meant random civilians, his allies, even villains that were already downed. The recoil from his explosions was harsh, but there was a reason the primary exercises he did were focused on his back muscles rather than too much on his biceps that way he wasn't knocked on his ass with a dislocated shoulder every time he used his quirk.

Rain starts to fall.

His skin becomes chilled at first, but as he continues to work, it warms up again, becoming almost overheated. He can see the steam rolling off his palms and fingers as he lights nitroglycerin up over and over again.

Nothing stops his palms from igniting, but the explosions do become smaller and smaller and as the ground becomes muddy, he starts to slide with the blasts, feet losing their grip as the earth softens.

And then the rain becomes a downpour.

It's not long before his clothes are absolutely soaked through. He doesn't stop though. Not until he slips and hits the ground so hard the breath is knocked out of him. Mud covering half his body as he struggles to his feet. Katsuki moves towards the closest gym, an out of the way one that's not normally used, opening the doors and slipping inside. He freezes at the sound of voices.

"Your arms are going all over the place when you go for a kick. You need to be conscious of all your limbs when you make a move," All Might's voice calls out.

Katsuki stills.

"Right!" Deku says hastily.

He can hear quick, heavy movements. Feet landing too hard. The soft ‘thud’ of a body landing on the ground.

Katsuki peaks around the corner to see the two of them alone in the gym. Private lessons for All Might’s not so secret, favorite student.

“That’s a little too much. You don’t want to hold your arms in that far when you’re doing that high kick. Elbows in, but don’t have them touching your sides,” All Might instructed.

Katsuki couldn’t help himself, he slid down the wall, watching quietly as the two of them talked and worked together. The fondness was obvious. He couldn’t help the small jealous ball that sat in the pit of his stomach.

All Might’s voice was so much softer here than it ever was when the man was teaching them. It had a soothing quality to it. Kind rather than just cheerful.

The skeletal features stood out. Thin arms and bony face. There were still bandages wrapped around the man’s arm from Kamino.

His fault.

Katsuki shivered.

He shouldn’t be here. All Might was... he shouldn’t be here. Intruding where he didn’t belong. Where he would never belong. Even if he proved he could be a hero at the Exam, there was nothing that could ever make up for taking All Might from everyone.

“How was that?” Deku asked.

“Much better!” All Might called out. “Almost perfect, I’d say.”

There was pride in that voice.

Never in his life had Katsuki felt more unwelcome and alone than sitting just out of reach of his hero and Deku. Listening in to a conversation he knew he’d never have himself. The friendly, familiar banter full of such warmth.

Katsuki stood, hunched against the wall and took a step back.

And then another.

And another.

Until he, as quietly as possible, opened the door and slipped back out into the pouring rain.

Chapter End Notes

Welp. This chapter got way too long and I had to cut it in half. Again. So next chapter is the actual Exam and will be the last chapter of Part 1!

We [Still] See You

Chapter Summary

The Hero Licensing Exam

Chapter Notes

Guuuuuuuys... Holy shit. The Wifi Tower near my home got knocked out by a blizzard and I have NOT been able to get online. It's still going in and out like crazy so I don't think it's been quite fixed yet. Lady Sif showed me a little backdoor trick though to getting this posted quickly before the WIFI goes out again.

Chapter 8: We [Still] See You

Katsuki was uncomfortable with the crowd.

They were boxed in on all sides by students from other schools. Katsuki felt his shoulders hunch as he looked around and found eyes looking back. Fuck. It had been a long time since he'd been surrounded by so many people that weren't his classmates.

It unnerved him in a way that made him feel sick.

He was better than this.

Stronger than this.

Some extras weren't going to fuck this up for him.

Those thoughts didn't stop Katsuki from stepping closer to Kirishima and Kaminari as students started to approach them. Holy shit. He hadn't seen this many people since the Sport's Festival. He had to stop himself from invading Kirishima's personal space as the hundreds around them screamed and yelled in excitement.

"Ah, I'm getting nervous," Jirou said, clutching at her backpack.

"I wonder what we'll have to do... ahahaha... I wonder if I can get my provisional license," Mineta muttered, tilting from side to side anxiously.

As much as he despised the idea of agreeing with the grape stain... there was a small voice in the back of his head that was just as stressed out. A headache had formed two days ago at the back of his head and had slowly moved its way upwards until everything throbbed. He'd popped a few pain meds as they'd gotten off of the bus and it had yet to kick in. The steady 'throb' 'throb' 'throb' doing a damn good job of distracting him from his slowly mounting panic and fuck... he hadn't realized until now how bad his claustrophobia had gone from 'mild annoyance at a tie' to 'I'm about ten seconds away from leaping onto the bus just to get ten feet between me and everything else.'

Aizawa lurched into view, bending down so that he was more at the grape stains level.

"Mineta, it's not about whether or not you can, go and get it!" Aizawa said firmly.

"Right! O-of c-course!"

Katsuki's shoulders loosened.

"If you can pass this test and get your provisional license then you novice eggs will become chicks..." What the fuck kind of speech was that? "You'll hatch into Semi-Pros. Do your best."

Katsuki breathed in.

Right. Semi-Pros. The Public Safety Commission promised that if he passed this then they'd leave him be. No more letters from the crazy lady. No ring. Katsuki would start doing internships and really get out the door.

He could do this.

He'd trained for this.

No fuck ups.

Exams were what Katsuki did best. Know the rules. Meet the criteria. Exams didn't have to deal with people. You had an objective and you attained it with skill and hard work and knowledge. Katsuki had that in spades. He could do this.

Hard work and never giving up. Those were his two best qualities, right? He could fucking do this.

“All right! I’ll become a chick,” Kaminari whispered to Kirishima.

Seriously, what the fuck was wrong with his classmates?

“Let’s all call out the usual!” Kirishima yelled out with far too enthusiasm.

Katsuki eyed the behemoth walking up behind his classmates, taking a step back to distance himself from the stranger. The guy’s eyes hadn’t so much as glanced at him and that had made relief bubble in him a bit. He’d never liked the idea of being invisible, but here and now it felt comforting.

“Ready, set- Plus Ultra!

“Plus Ultra!”

His two idiots leaped in fright as the guy screamed along with them. Katsuki smirked, even as his eyes landed on the other student in confusion.

“You shouldn’t drop in on other people’s huddles, Inasa,” one of the guy’s classmates reprimanded, sounding like a shorter more unpleasant version of Four-eyes. Katsuki recognized the hats they were wearing. The giant slanted S on top giving away the district easily enough. Anyone with braincells who’d entered UA should know them.

The guy, Inasa, apologized. As obnoxious and loud as any of his classmates on their worst days. Even Kaminari was unnerved by the guys sheer loudness which was as impressive as it was horrifying.

“Wait, that uniform...” Jirou muttered.

“It’s from that famous school in western Japan,” Ojiro said.

“U.A in the east, Shiketsu in the west,” Katsuki said, staring at the group, remaining just out of their space. He turned away, not paying attention from that point on as Deku started nerding out as another Pro-Hero approached. Students started to crowd in on them even more and Katsuki found himself moving closer to Kaminari. Making a line of his classmates between himself and the strangers.

Why were they just standing around?

The sooner they got inside the better prepared they’d be for the next...

and the further away Katsuki could get from this toxic crowding of teenage stupidity. A student popped up in front of Kaminari, startling him. Fuck.

“Even so, you all are aiming to be heroes like us, huh?” The brown haired teen said with enthusiasm. He turned to Katsuki and the blonde didn’t like what he saw. A practiced smile. A look about him as if he were in a play rather than talking to people. The guy grabbed Jirou’s hands next, causing her to look in shock. “That’s so wonderful! A heart of fortitude is what I believe all heroes should have from now on!”

‘Staged,’ was the word that came to mind as Katsuki took a step back, watching cautiously. He didn’t like this guy. Not one bit.

“From among you, there’s Bakugou, who experienced being at the center of the Kamino incident.”

Katsuki felt himself bristle.

Fuck.

God damn it. Despite the medicine, he felt his head throb worse rather than less. To bring it up so casually, like it meant nothing...

“You have an especially strong heart!”

Fake. Fucking bullshit. His eyes narrowed in on the guy.

“Today I’ll do my best while learning from you!”

The guy held out his hand to Katsuki who stood his ground despite every nerve screaming at him to leap back. To put distance between them. Instead, Katsuki slapped the hand out of his space.

“Stop pretending.” He growled. “What your saying doesn’t match the look in your eyes!”

Katsuki turned away from him as he watched the guy’s eyes narrow. He could practically see the calculation there. Watching him.

“Hey, stop being so rude!” Kirishima told him, looking horrified before turning to the stranger. “Sorry about that.”

The taller teen gave them that practiced smile again.

“It’s fine. It just proves how strong his heart is!” The side eye Katsuki

got from the guy, the watchful look. This guy was definitely one to watch out for. A manipulator for sure. It reminded him of Magne almost. Using kind words to try to get him on her side.

“Tch.”

He wouldn't be fooled by the likes of this bastard.

He was relieved to hear Aizawa's demand to get moving.

It was about time.

For the love of All Might... what the fuck was this?!

It was the bastard who'd signed off on the crazy therapist lady.

Katsuki stared in shock as Mera Yokumiru spoke to them in the orientation for the Provisional License Exam. The Heroes Public Safety Commission official whose confirmation letter sat under his bed. This was the guy who would be watching their Exams? Determining whether they would pass or fail?!

Too many people were trapped in the tiny room and Katsuki had a hard time hearing what was being said over the pounding of his heart. He had to get out of here. Fuck everyone and everything. Why would they design this room to be so god damn tiny? He felt people crowding in on him from all sides and he didn't even have the comfort of familiarity with his classmates because they'd spread out among the room when they'd first entered.

This was a nightmare.

Yokumiru at the front, both the least intimidating guy Katsuki had ever seen, and the coordinator of the threat looming over his head.

The crowd pushing and nudging up against him as the clock seemed to pause time just to demonstrate how much of a bitch time could be.

And it only got worse the longer the bastard talked.

100/1,504.

Less than 10% of the people here were allowed to pass. He felt a manic laugh bubble up. If he didn't pass, he'd have to wear the ring.

He'd have to go to that fucking lunatic. He clamped his hand over his mouth as a bit of nervous laughter fell through.

Beside him Mineta took a step away from him, a look on his face clearly stating he thought Katsuki had lost his mind. At least he was coming off as scary rather than terrified. Which he wasn't. It was like Aizawa said. They just had to do it. Katsuki had to pass. He had to. He also had to prove a point. He had to prove that he was hero material. He wasn't what they said he was.

Katsuki sticks the little light triggers on him with admittedly shaky hands. It seemed like he'd bumped into every blasted person in this nightmare box. Every nerve lit and wow, he should have brought more pain meds with him because what he'd taken was doing not a god damn thing for him. The test hadn't even start and Katsuki already felt drained.

The Walls around them fell away.

Katsuki looked out at the expanse of the exam. A tiny, frantic ball inside of him loosening the smallest bit. Already their fellow examinees were rushing off into the sectors, probably choosing the areas where their own quirks worked best. Katsuki eyed his options. Open space was too obvious and it would leave him open to attacks from people with similar skill sets. He needed an area where it would put the bastards at a disadvantage to fight him.

High up.

Open for movement but not so open that those with wide range quirks could have a free for all. A place where Katsuki's skills at close and long range could be used. He spotted some tall buildings in the distance. Not the skyscrapers but maybe still in the city area? Those highway looking roads maybe? It would offer mobility and attack range while limiting most people's options. He'd have to be careful though because anyone in that area would most likely have chosen it because their quirks were strongest in those types of areas too.

Beside him, Deku started to make some speech about working together.

Working together? There were twenty of them. All that would do would widen how much of a target they all had on their backs. Didn't they fucking get it? They'd been in the spotlight for months. Everyone would be watching them. Waiting.

“Yeah right, this isn’t a field trip!” Katsuki hissed out, turning away from his class and heading towards the highways. The thrill of not having bodies around him was immense, enough to lighten the staggering weight that felt like it was pushing down on him.

“Idiot, wait up!” Kirishima called after him.

Katsuki kept moving, watching as their classmates started to head towards the open area of the rock formations. Jeez. Had they even bothered to consider their options? Katsuki picked up the pace, running as he took in the other groups. There were a few schools heading under the roadways. So he’d go above. Get a vantage point.

Behind him Kirishima was muttering expletives as he tried to keep up. Katsuki slowed down the smallest bit for the redhead. Letting his own explosions die down as he touched down on the ground.

“There’s hundreds of them! You can’t face all of that by yourself!” Kirishima hissed as he caught up. “I don’t know what’s going through your head lately, but you’ve got to...”

A loud boom went off in the distance.

Katsuki turned to glance back at where their class was and yup. One giant target. Just like he thought.

“Holy shit!” Kaminari whispered.

Katsuki glanced at the other blonde in surprise. Not just that he’d followed behind them but that he hadn’t noticed.

“We were all broadcast at the Sport’s Festival. We’ve been in the spotlight from day one. Of fucking course we’re going to be targeted before anyone else,” Katsuki drawled.

“And you didn’t think to warn anyone?” Kirishima yelled at him.

“It’s obvious. I shouldn’t *need* to warn anyone.”

Kaminari sighed in exasperation.

Another explosion sounded.

“And I’ve got one of the biggest targets on my back,” Katsuki added in warning. “So stop fucking following me.”

Both Kirishima and Kaminari paused at that, exchanging looks.

“Is that why you went off by yourself?” Kirishima asked, eyeing him in disapproval. “You know we’re here for you, bro!”

Fucking whatever.

He hadn’t understood Kirishima’s desire to stick with him at the USJ or work with him at the Festival. He’d concluded that his best friend was missing a vital self-preservation genetic code from the get go so he really shouldn’t be surprised.

Katsuki hooked his foot in the latter, hauling himself up towards the highway.

“I don’t fucking need you,” Katsuki hissed. “I can handle this exam on my own.”

He eyed the surrounding area as they climbed, wondering if the cameras and video feed would be like the ones at U.A. If they only observed with no audio or if everything that was being said was being watched by that droopy eyed fucking piece of shit.

He needed to pass by his own power and no one else’s or the Hero Public Safety Commission might find some excuse to fail him. Katsuki tried to make them leave, earning more reprimands from Kirishima and yelling from Kaminari, but they both stayed.

A tiny, weak part of him appreciated that.

His hand clutched the last wrung and Katsuki hauled himself up.

Now or never.

He’d passed the first part.

Katsuki felt shaky relief bordering on manic elation thrum through him. A simple game of extreme tag. That was it. Katsuki let out an unsteady breath as Kaminari and Kirishima celebrated far too loudly.

He’d overthought all of this.

He was going to be okay. If the second part was as straight forward as the first part then he’d be fine. He’d more than studied for this shit. The first part had focused on combat skills. The losers on the bridge had been... concerningly easy to beat. There had been a couple quirks

with potential, but the people who possessed those quirks had been... unprepared was the best word for it. As if they hadn't had a single day of structured training before. At least the flesh freak had known how to take advantage of his surroundings and knew some form of strategy.

Even when he'd lit up his third ball and the message had been delivered, Katsuki had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. The ax to fall. The trick to be delivered to tell him that there was something more to this test.

None came.

It had really been that straight forward.

A body sat next to him.

He glanced up to see the chick from Shiketsu sitting next to him. Hadn't he already told them off? She was far too close and Katsuki moved over, pointedly. Fuck these people and their refusal to observe personal space. Did he have a face that said 'approach me'? Because he'd been cultivating the opposite since he was born and that would be disappointing as fuck.

He looked away as Kirishima and Kaminari walked over to Sero and Horns, talking animatedly about their own experiences in the exam. Obnoxious hand gestures and waving about.

"Things seem like they've been pretty rough for you since Kamino."

Katsuki stiffened.

Fucking hell.

Now what?

"Fuck off," Katsuki muttered under his breath. Katsuki was just about as blunt as one could get, but even he fucking knew not to bring up horrible shit that's happened to people right to their god damn face. These people needed to learn some fucking manners and if Katsuki of all people was saying that, the advice was legit.

Still.

He didn't want to make a scene. Not here. Not at his provisional license exam. The girl smiled at him and there was something creepily

familiar about it though he was sure he'd never met her before in his life.

"It seems to me that there's a lot of people out there who have a lot to say about what happened. Does it bother you?"

Katsuki flipped her off, standing to walk away.

"We see you."

Every muscle in his body froze. His feet stumbled and panic welled inside of him. Move. MOVE! Katsuki shouted at himself, stiffly turning to stare at her and nearly tripping over his own feet.

"What?"

The girl smiled, her mouth hooked up to show her teeth and that looked wrong. That smile was familiar, but not. He'd never met her before but everything about her was screaming alarms in his head. The way she leaned forward with her arms crossed...

"We See You," she said lightly, tilting her head in a playful manner. "We always have. Unlike all of these people here. We care."

"You're from the League," Katsuki whispered, looking around them.

There were a lot of students here.

No.

No.

No.

Not again.

"Of course not, silly!" The girl smiled at him again. And yeah, fuck, yeah. Where had he seen that smile before? Where the fuck had he seen it? "I'm just a student from Shiketsu. I'm just saying that not everyone here wants to judge you for causing All Might to fall."

Katsuki swallowed, watching her closely, his hands sparked off, little explosions going off at the tip of his fingers.

He looked around the room, trying to find the Proctors, but there were no adults in sight. Only his fellow testers. Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck. Katsuki turned back and... and she was gone. Katsuki shivered and

walked backward, looking for her in the crowd, but it was as if she'd just... disappeared.

Holy shit.

Katsuki tried to find an adult. He needed to tell them a League member was here. There was no way she knew about those fucking text messages unless she was involved. There was no fucking way.

Before Katsuki could do anything Mera Yokumiru's voice sounded on the loud speakers and the walls of the building were collapsing around them again.

"The second part of the Exam begins now."

He listened in rapt attention as the man explained things. The entire stadium of districts collapsing dramatically around them.

Katsuki felt feverish and sick. Rescue? He'd said something about rescue? But the League was here. They were here somewhere and they were fucking planning something. Fuck. Fuck. Was he overthinking this? But that fucking smile and what she said... Katsuki swallowed.

Was something going to happen here?

Were they going to be attacked?

Or was Katsuki just losing his mind? So paranoid that he was making mountains out of molehills? The girl had been a student. What if she was just a bitch? Nothing but someone who'd wanted to throw him off for this test? It could have just been a coincidence that she'd said 'We see you.' It wasn't like the League had a commercial claim to those words.

Still, he launched himself away from his classmates. He couldn't do this to them again. He couldn't fucking do this again. The sound of footsteps following him made him turn to see Kirishima and Kaminari.

"Why the fuck are you following me again?!" Katsuki shrieked.

"Cause we wanna," they both grinned at him.

He felt shaken as he looked around.

Focus. Focus.

What were the perimeters? Find people. Rescue them, right? Fuck.

Okay. Okay. His heart felt like it was trying to claw its way out of his chest.

The buildings here are all destroyed.

There's no epicenter though. There's no obvious trail from a Villain. It's more like the aftermath of an earthquake. Texts run through his head. He can practically see the highlighted safety procedures in front of him. **Arriving First. Leaving Last.**

Large Scale catastrophes were all about finding priority victims. Any individuals suffering from minor injuries but capable of moving on their own were to be directed in the right direction but otherwise considered legally in charge of their own safety and evacuation. To spend time on every victim was to potentially lose more lives.

Confined Space rescues were, technically the rarest, but in earthquake scenarios the most common and most dangerous. It was important not to substitute emotions for intelligence.

“There may be a sense of urgency to move in as quickly as possible without evaluating the best route of rescue. Time is the enemy here, but do not take short cuts in appropriate procedures for the sake of shaving off a few seconds or minutes. Most of the time these short cuts do not end up saving time anyways as the person will eventually have to evaluate a situation from within the confined space once they have made it to the victim. Taking the time to plan the removal of the victim from their confined space will improve efficiency and likelihood for success.”

Katsuki knew all the rules. All the best ways to be the most efficient. Kirishima and Kaminari might be compromised by their emotions, trying to baby every single person they were rescuing, but Katsuki knew what the most important shit here was.

Get to the top priority victims first.

Don't bother with minor injury victims.

Don't rush, plan.

Katsuki guided Kirishima and Kaminari on the right procedures. Made sure they got to the people who really needed it even when the two of them were being dumb, trying to be overly nice to every person they went passed.

That wasn't the priority in situations like this.

Priority. Speed. Accuracy. Safety.

So far they'd saved nearly sixty people. Katsuki felt giddy. Maybe he'd never develop Best Jeanist standards of smiling and waving and being fake with people, but Katsuki was getting shit done. He was 'saving' lives.

Priority. Speed. Accuracy. Safety.

Sixty-one.

Sixty-two.

Sixty-three.

"Come on, man," Kirishima hissed. "You have to stop yelling at people."

"And you have to recognize that those three only have a few cuts," Katsuki hissed. "So what if they are crying? There's people who are dying. You can't waste time on people's feelings in catastrophes. They'll get the fuck over it. Do you know who won't get over it? The people who are dying. If they die. That's it. They won't be able to smile or cry."

Kaminari rubbed the back of his neck as they dropped into a hole.

"I get that, but we're supposed to be heroes. Yelling at people isn't going to make this any easier."

"They always want to argue with you," Katsuki snapped. "If you don't yell then they don't listen. You have to show them authority, dumb ass."

"I don't think that's how that works," Kirishima muttered.

Katsuki blasted off into the air, using his explosions to slow his momentum and landing lightly on top of a twisted set of metal pipes. He looked down into the dark abyss, setting off an explosion for light.

Four people looked up at him from the depths.

"Oi! Tell me your injuries!"

On cue, fucking actors, one of them burst into tears.

“One of us is disorientated so I’m pretty sure he has a concussion!” A male voice boomed up at him. “I have a broken leg and broken ribs. My friend is unconscious! Bue seems fine though!”

Right.

“We got a priority rescue,” Katsuki called out.

He lit up the area again, examining the walls.

“Kirishima! You see those metal rods over there? I want you to use your quirk to stabilize these walls with those rods. There’s a point about midway down this shaft that looks like it might collapse if we just bring them up. Sparks! There was a long metal sheet a couple hundred feet back where we came. Go grab that for me for our ribs guy.”

“On it!”

They worked well together.

Katsuki let them do their whole fucking reassuring and happy go lucky shit while he focused on instructing them on the best ways to get these extras out of the god damn hole.

Sixty-four.

Sixty-five.

Sixty-six.

Sixty-seven.

Fuck yeah.

He was going to pass. It was going to be okay. For the first time in forever, he shared a vicious, satisfied smile with Kirishima. He let Kaminari give him a side hug. His shoulders began to relax. All that studying. All that training was paying off.

When King Orca ‘attacked’ Katsuki decided to stay rather than to fight. He was here to prove a point after all. He was here to rescue people. To show that he could fucking do this shit. He’d show all those motherfuckers whose boss.

He’d bet anything there were a few blowhards who were rushing to take down the bad guys and Katsuki would show that he knew what

the game was. He knew what these fuckers would want to see from him.

When the buzzard rang loud and clear, everyone began cheering around him. Sweat soaked and feeling just about ready to faint from the stress leaving him, Katsuki made his way with everyone else to the room.

Much less crowded now. Instead of the thousand or so people in the room there was only a hundred. Even the actors had headed off to their own area to clean up and write the reports. He and his classmates had their scratches and bruises attended to and took quick showers before folding their costumes up and getting into their school uniforms.

As he tugged his shoes on it finally hit him.

The test had been to become Semi-Pros.

He would be an official hero now.

Katsuki's lips twitched at the thought. He'd been so focused and stressed about the consequences of failing that he hadn't even thought about the real reason for why he was here today. He'd been so busy trying to prove that he wasn't a villain that he forgot that this whole thing was to become a hero.

When had he forgotten that?

The time limit had been tight, but they'd saved a lot of people. Katsuki followed Kirishima and Kaminari out of the locker room and stood behind him as the other students gathered. Mera Yokumiru's voice sounded through the speaker again. The flat, tired voice made him feel uneasy. It was hard to picture the too formal words of the letter insisting upon his compliance being spoken with that voice.

The board blinked.

The scores went up.

Katsuki's eyes scanned the board. Kirishima's name was up there. Horns. Deku's... he paused for a long moment as he went through the names once... twice... a third time.

There was no Katsuki Bakugou up there.

His name wasn't on the board.

Katsuki doesn't remember the trip back. That should bother him. He doesn't remember getting on the bus or the ride or getting off. One moment he's staring at the board, feeling everything slip, fall, faster and faster.

Someone nudged him and he remembers following his classmates.

After that though?

Katsuki remembers following them and then he's in his dorm room. Standing in front of his bed. Then he's on it. Staring at the wall. He blinks and the light pouring in from the window is gone and it's dark out.

He knows he falls asleep at some point.

He wakes up on his side and curls into a ball and there's light shining through his room from his window. He gets up only long enough to close the blinds, throwing the room in darkness.

Katsuki doesn't bother to practice the grounding techniques he usually tries when he starts to slip. Instead, he lets himself fall deeper into it. He doesn't move and he doesn't think. If he thinks, he might start screaming.

He falls asleep again.

It's dark outside.

It's light.

Katsuki doesn't move.

"Hey man, come on, you have to come out at some point," Kirishima's voice sounded from the other side of the door. "It's been two days. At

least eat the food I'm bringing you."

Two days? Katsuki blinks in surprise. Aware, vaguely, of how dry his throat is. He moves a little bit and is alarmed that his limbs feel heavy. Pins and needles attack his legs and his right arm feels numb and boneless in the shoulder where he's been leaning heavily against the wall.

There was a sigh.

"Aizawa says if you don't listen to me then he's going to come in and I think we both know you don't want to deal with a pissed off sensei, right?"

Katsuki finds that he honestly doesn't care. Which is odd. Its something he normally would care about a lot. But in the face of... everything. It seems like such a tiny, insignificant and stupid thing to worry about.

A fist banged on the door.

"At least say something so I know your alive! Shit. Bakugou just... if you don't speak up I'm gonna break your door!"

Another bang sounded. Soon enough the sound of metal being crushed and Kirishima came in, eyes frantically scanning the dark room before Katsuki felt the eyes land on him.

"Bakugou..." Kirishima wavered.

Katsuki didn't move.

Hadn't moved from his spot leaning against the wall and staring at the ceiling in a while. He felt the bed dip as the redhead sat heavily, nudging him hard. It caused the tingling in his legs to worsen into a sharp, hot sensation as it unintentional jostled him. Katsuki didn't react.

"This isn't the end of the world. They said you can do remedial courses. You're still going to get your license."

He was nudged again, harder this time, a rough shoulder shake that sent the hot pins and needles through his entire left side. He sat up a bit with some difficulty, finding his body not quite able to keep up with that order, his wrist feeling like it was bending at an odd angle as he sat up more.

“You’re scaring me. Say something, please?” Kirishima begged him.

Katsuki couldn’t bring himself to even look at him. It was hard to focus and harder even to move, but he was sitting up more at least.

“I know you worked really hard and it sucks that you didn’t make it but...” Kirishima faltered. “Bakugou? You don’t have to talk but I’ve got some soup. I left it outside the door. Do you think you can eat it for me?”

Kirishima disappeared for a moment, coming back with the bowl and setting it down on the bedside table. He shifted from foot to foot, looking unsure before padding over and turning on the light.

Katsuki flinched.

Kirishima’s wide eyed stare watched him.

“Its... why are you still wearing your uniform? It’s Sunday! Bakugou, the exam was on Friday. Have you... have you not even changed since we got back?!”

Strong hands grabbed both of his shoulders and Katsuki curled inwards, pressing himself against the wall as he looked anywhere but at Kirishima who’d determinedly planted himself too close. Invading his space. Making it hard to breathe. Katsuki forced his knees between them, sitting up and moving more than he had in what felt like forever. The pins and needles was giving way to aches and pain as his joints protested the sudden movement.

A spark went off and an explosion sounded.

Was that him?

Of course it was, who the fuck else would it be?

Katsuki blinked as Kirishima stared back at him, now a few feet away from the bed having been blown back, lines stretching across his body telling Katsuki that he’d hardened. Part of his shirt missing.

His palms smoked, the smoke rising into the air and he winced as he realized there would be ash on the ceiling.

But at least Kirishima was away from him.

He could breathe again.

The redhead held up his hands in a placating mode, but they were still hardened.

“Sorry!” Kirishima said, soft, frazzled. “I panicked. Talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking, man, just... I won’t judge. Whatever is on your mind just...”

Kirishima choked up.

He sounded like he was crying.

“I don’t know what to do,” Kirishima whispered. “Tell me how to help you. I’ll do it.”

“Kirishima.”

That wasn’t his voice.

Aizawa stepped into the room. Taking in the scene with worried eyes. That was odd. Katsuki didn’t know Aizawa could look worried. For others, sure, but it felt alien directed at him. Unnatural. Kirishima wiped at his face, breathing weird, voice hitching.

“Sensei,” Kirishima’s voice was relieved, “he won’t talk. He won’t eat. I don’t think he’s even moved since we got back.”

“I’ll handle this.”

It was a dismissal.

Though knowing the redhead, he’d pop over to his bedroom and stick his ear to the wall. The heavy steps told him that Kirishima’s hardening hadn’t dropped yet. It wasn’t like him to lose control of his quirk enough to not immediately loosen.

“I’m sorry I didn’t check on you sooner,” Aizawa said softly, sitting on the corner of the bed. Not too close. Katsuki appreciated that. His teacher’s hands were raised, in full view. Katsuki still eyed him warily though.

“Can you tell me what day it is?” Aizawa asked softly.

Katsuki didn’t know.

Though he’s pretty sure Kirishima just mentioned it. The day slipped from his head though. He couldn’t remember.

He shook his head.

Aizawa gazed worriedly at him.

“Can you eat the soup for me?” Aizawa asked him, nodding towards the bowl. Katsuki blinked hard, shaking his arm to try to get the feeling back. His teacher watched him carefully. He clenched his hand over and over again.

There was a medical term for it.

When the nerves of a body part were cut off from the brain due to pressure. A temporary paralysis. Paralysis. It sort of sounded like that. Ah...

Paresthesia.

He's read the term recently. In one of the rescue manuals. Victims who'd are trapped for long periods of time might not be able to move well due to paresthesia setting in. They might become alarmed by this. Often times this is due to nerve compression rather than blood flow being cut off.

When he feels more secure in his body's ability to hold the bowl, he wraps his hands around it. It's too hot. His fingers are unnatural cold. He moves the bowl to his lap, against the pants of his school uniform and takes a bite. It relieves the feeling of dryness in his throat but makes him more aware of how thirsty he is.

“Water?” Katsuki croaks.

Aizawa looks at him hard. Katsuki vaguely points to a hoard of water bottles he has in his corner. The man nods and grabs one for him, thrusting it into his open hand.

“Is that the first time you've had water since the Exam?” Aizawa asked, the man tries for casual, but his words are too sharp, too angry and tight and disapproving.

Katsuki shrugs.

His hands are shaking though as he uncaps the lid and by the way his teacher stares at them, he thinks that its answer enough.

Aizawa curses under his breath and runs his hand through his hair as he sits down on the bed. It dips under the man's weight enough that

Katsuki has to lift the bowl or be burned by the hot soup.

“This isn’t like you,” Aizawa murmurs. Katsuki’s pretty sure the man isn’t talking to him when he says this so he doesn’t respond. He eats more of the soup, feeling more like himself with each spoonful. More aware too. It makes him feel a little queasy, but he knows that’s just because the smell of the soup, vegetable? Is too strong on a stomach that hasn’t eaten in... two days? Three? Whatever.

He focuses on the smoothness of the bowl. White bowl. Red and brown soup. His grounding technique pulls him further out of his own head. The burning sensation on his stiff fingers helps bring them to life. He knows not to eat too much of it too fast. After a few more bites he puts it on the nightstand by his bed, takes a few more sips of his water. He feels better. More substantial than he had before. More aware.

He feels kinda gross.

His hair is stiff and there’s a hefty layer of dried sweat on him. Which is dangerous and he knows better. His clothes feel damp and stiff at the same time. He needs a shower. Needs to get out of these clothes. Now that he’s moving around a bit, he realizes he needs to piss too. He rolls his shoulder and feels about a dozen things pop along his back and spine. Feels bones move back into place and the ache subside a bit.

He flinches when a hand touches his forehead, looking through his bangs at Aizawa as the man checks his temperature and frowns more.

“Bakugou... this is about failing the exam, isn’t it?” The man asks him. It sounds more like he’s looking for confirmation rather than anything else. His teacher has already made up his mind on what the issue is and Katsuki sort of wants to crack up at that.

But he is the first adult whose shown concern for him in a long while or has bothered to ask Katsuki rather than simply make declarations. Even if he’s pretty sure Aizawa has already assumed as much.

Which, of course it's about the Exam, but is it?

Because there’s a bracelet under his bed that the Hero Public Safety Commission wants him to wear now or he’ll be barred from being a Hero for life. There’s a crazy fucking woman he’s going to have to go see now. There’s letters and threats and things under his bed that he doesn’t know what to do with.

There's lies he's carrying even though its technically just omissions.

He hasn't told Aizawa that he knew about the threat to the camp.

He hasn't told Aizawa about the League stalking him before they ever got to the training area.

There's All Might.

Kamino.

There's the threat of what is going to happen when his mom finally figures out what he and his dad have done. What they are going to do. The question of how she'll react. What she'll try to do.

He'd felt so sure, despite fucking everything, that an exam, at least, he could pass.

He knew the procedures backwards and forwards.

He knew the laws.

He had the power and the abilities and the knowledge.

Katsuki had failed solely because of who he was as a person and there was no way, at this point, that he could deny that. He'd proven them all right. The phone calls. The text messages. The letters. The League. The people online and on the streets. His own mother.

He doesn't know how to move forward.

Something has to change and with a sinking feeling that makes his heart throb he knows what that something is.

He has to admit to himself that his reasons for admiring All Might were wrong. The idea that no matter how bad the outcome looked, that you had to keep going. The idea that hard work and not giving up, the things Katsuki strove for above everything else, weren't good enough and were obviously not the things All Might valued above all else.

What Katsuki was at his core, wasn't what made a hero.

Katsuki wasn't a hero.

"Bakugou."

Katsuki turned to see Aizawa had moved and was sitting, hunched in front of him.

“It looks like your thinking pretty hard about something. You want to clue me in?” Aizawa asked.

“What do you consider to be a hero?” Katsuki asked.

The man was gruff. Unsociable on his best days. Aizawa had never shown himself to smile for the media or placate people. Yet, he was undoubtably a hero, one of the best. The way he’d fought against all those villains at the USJ... How he went above and beyond, plus ultra, to win against the odds.

But that wasn’t enough. Obviously.

Katsuki had done that too. Fighting first eight against one and then six against one in Kamino. He’d fought against the odds.

But what had he accomplished?

Because of the rescue attempt to save Katsuki so many people had died in the buildings that had collapsed. In One For All’s initial attack. All Might had been forced to retire. Best Jeanist had been heavily injured.

Katsuki hadn’t even been able to help. He’d been in the way. An inconvenience at best. A Fatal reckoning at worst.

“A hero, huh?” Aizawa said slowly. “I take it this is about the results you got from the exam?” Katsuki shrugged. “Do you understand why you failed?”

“While I prioritized rescues and had peak efficiency, I lacked compassion, manners, and care for the ‘victims.’” Katsuki recited dutifully. “I wasn’t personable, and I didn’t make people feel safe. I was too aggressive and too dismissive of the people around me.”

“You can recite what the exam results said,” Aizawa acknowledged, “but do you understand what that means?”

‘That I shouldn’t be myself.’

“I understand what it means. I just don’t know how to do it,” Katsuki said tiredly.

“You don’t have to become best friends with every person you rescue,

but a little self-control goes a long way,” Aizawa told him. “Rescuing people is the most important job one has as a hero. Sometimes that means physically, sometimes mentally, but most of the time, it’s a combination of both.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Katsuki pressed. “What does that fucking mean?”

“At this point, you’ve experienced first hand attacks by Villains, even before you entered into UA. Think about what was said to you during the crisis and right afterwards.”

Katsuki stared blankly at the man.

That didn’t help at all. The Sludge incident when he was fourteen there’d just been some Pro’s offering him spots at their agency. No one had really talked to him but more at him. All Might hadn’t stuck around.

Katsuki had walked home alone after that.

The USJ... it had been standard. Police had questioned him about his encounter. Yadda yadda, blah, blah, nothing special. He can’t recall a single thing outside of that. I-Island was the same. Even after his own kidnapping, no Pro heroes had spoken with him, the questioning had been left up to the police. He’d been escorted home in a squad car in complete silence. There wasn’t anything Katsuki had been doing in the Exam that he hadn’t witnessed first hand by the professionals.

But that wasn’t... absolutely true.

At the bar...

“All Might made a big entrance when they came for me... told me I was brave for enduring for so long,” Katsuki said slowly, an ugly thought coming to the forefront. “Was that just a line then? A habit to say something nice to the ‘victims’?”

Fake.

That’s what it was.

A platitude that meant nothing.

He picked the bowl back up, fiddling with the glass as his shoulders hunched more, staring at the soup, stirring the spoon slowly as that

thought sunk in. He felt a hard nudge and looked up to see Aizawa staring hard at him, analyzing him.

“Missions where you *know* the person your rescuing are rare and usually not allowed. It could compromise a hero’s objectivity and thinking. The time you were gone was one where none of us slept. What ever All Might said that night, he meant.”

There was a long pause in the man’s speech.

“You didn’t fail this exam because you’re a bad hero, Bakugou,” Aizawa told him quietly. “You ‘rescued’ more people than most. You directed Kirishima and Kaminari perfectly. You *failed* because of your single-minded approach. You were looking at the people like numbers, not human beings.”

“Coddling people isn’t my job. They should be smart enough to know that time means people’s lives,” Katsuki snapped.

“I agree to an extent,” Aizawa said carefully. The man was speaking slower than his already unrushed dialogue. “But your behavior was more than just efficient and quick paced, it was aggressive and combative, both with your teammates and the ‘victims’ you rescued. No one is saying you have to be a ray of sunshine, but you should at least strive to keep negative emotions in check.”

Katsuki wasn’t sure how to say *interacting with people stressed him out*. Pulled him tight. It seemed like stating how unfit he was to be a hero to admit that out loud. That he felt on edge whenever there was more than a small group around him. Always expecting the next attack. The flash of a camera. An unfriendly word. A threat. Eyes watching him from every nook.

How could he be a hero if he couldn’t fucking deal with being around people?

How could he be so god damn weak that he’d started to panic right off the bat when they’d gotten off the bus and been surrounded by... not hostiles... just... other students. Not even civilians. They had been fellow heroes in training and still Katsuki had faltered and felt cornered the whole time he was there.

And...

And then she’d come.

Katsuki sat up straight as he remembered the girl with the familiar smile.

'We See You.'

Was she apart of the League or had she just gotten insanely lucky when it came to fucking with him? It wasn't like the League of Villains were the only people harassing him. The girl wasn't the only student either. Resentment sat heavy in the hallways of his school. He heard the murmuring and whispers. He glares. The side-eyes. The way people stepped away from him when he walked in the hallways.

"Bakugou," Katsuki looked up to see Aizawa staring at him again. "It's been a full month since everyone has moved into the dorms. You haven't been interacting with your classmates at all. Everyone else gathers a few times a week to have a class dinner. There's Friday movie night in the common area. Group training sessions. Game nights. Yet no one has seen you at any of these. Not even your own group you tend to stick with during classes."

"There's better ways to spend my time," Katsuki said dismissively.

Aizawa's eyes narrowed at that.

"Like sit in your room in the dark starving yourself for two and a half days?" Aizawa asked. Katsuki flinched. "Kirishima says you haven't touched anything he's brought up."

Katsuki shrugged.

Aizawa sighed.

"Look, I hate to do this, but this can't happen again. What you've done here is dangerous and I will be checking up on you every other day and with others to make sure you're properly eating and taking care of yourself. Beyond that, I'm making it mandatory that you have to spend half an hour out in the common area each day from 6:00 pm to 6:30 pm except on those days when you go to your remedial classes. You don't have to talk to anyone, but you need to be around people more. Self-isolating to the extent you have been is not healthy."

Katsuki grimaced.

"You're not in trouble. This isn't a punishment. Think of it as part of learning socialization if you want. There's a reason why they gave you the opportunity to still get your license, you know. You have the

talent, the work ethic, and the abilities of a hero, you just need to learn people skills. Have you considered going to Hound Dog?"

Katsuki blinked.

The school's counselor?

Did Aizawa think there was something wrong with him too? Wasn't it enough that the Public Safety Commission was going to force him to go to one? Katsuki scowled, glaring at the floor.

"No one has to know," Aizawa told him, "but it's nothing to be ashamed of to need or want to talk to someone, especially when you've been through so much. Getting stuff off your chest and talking things out is a great benefit. I go from time to time too. Most heroes do to some extent. Some of us get together with hero groups for the purpose of venting and talking things out, discussion and debate. It helps."

Katsuki paused at that.

"What exactly happens when you go?"

Katsuki hated to say it, but his voice sounded weak. Uncertain even to his own ears.

"Mostly it's just talking about whatever you want. Whatever makes you feel comfortable. They'll usually set up goals with you. What you have to remember is that it's geared towards you and what you need. It's about helping you, above all else, to work through those things that most trouble you," Aizawa said carefully.

"So... you think I should go along with it then?" Katsuki asked slowly. "Therapy? You think it would help with the stuff it said I failed in?"

"I'm the last person to lecture others on a lack of social etiquettes," Aizawa said with a shrug. "But yeah, I think talking to someone would be good for you, and even if you're not comfortable with going to someone like Hound Dog, I'm here for you as well. My door is open whenever you're ready to talk."

Katsuki fidgeted, his bowl of soup had gone lukewarm while they'd spoken, but he couldn't see himself going downstairs to warm it up again. He took a bite of the cold soup. The salt more stark against his tongue than when it had been hot.

“Bakugou... I have to ask, have you done things like this in the past?”

“Things like what?”

Aizawa gestured at Katsuki.

“Self-isolating. Not eating. Not showering or bothering to change your clothes. Have you done things like this in the past when faced with... with... negative events happening?”

Katsuki blinked in surprise.

He'd never thought about it and had never heard anyone phrase it quite like that.

Had he? There had definitely been more times he'd lost track of time, sure. Instances where there were long stretches where he stayed in his room to avoid his mother. Plenty of weekends where his dad coming in with food and to check up on him were the only times he spoke with people.

But Aizawa talked about it in a weird tone.

Like Katsuki had been caught cutting himself or something.

“I mean,” Katsuki said slowly, “I guess? It's not like I'm avoiding people and I just... haven't been hungry.” Katsuki shrugged. “And it's only been two days.”

He'd spent way longer alone than that without seeing a single soul.

His parents went on plenty of business trips after all. And Katsuki ate when he was hungry, he wasn't starving himself, he just hadn't noticed.

“I haven't been active so it's not like I *need* a lot. I eat plenty before and after training.”

Despite sitting right next to him, Katsuki couldn't distinguish the noises coming out of Aizawa's mouth as words. He raised his eyebrows at his teacher as the man put his head in his hands.

“Okay... I don't know where to start with that,” Aizawa muttered. “I'll be the one escorting you and Todoroki to your remedial courses starting this Wednesday. You got the information packet at the Exams, right?”

Katsuki had no idea but he nodded anyway.

He could always copy Todoroki's shit down.

"Okay, great. I can't believe I have to tell you this, but I don't care if the only thing you do over the course of a day is break wind, you eat. Understand me?"

He snorted.

"Sure."

"I'm serious, Bakugou, I'll be watching you to make sure you're taking care of yourself and if your not, I'll sick All Might on you to be your personal cheerleader for the foreseeable future. Don't test me."

He sobered at that.

'He absolutely would.'

Katsuki stiffened as a hand landed on his head. Its not like the random smacks his mom hits him with, it's a soft touch. He looks up through his bangs to see Aizawa standing now, gazing at him with a look that was... Katsuki's not sure what to call it. He doesn't think anyone's ever looked at him like that.

"The Villains were absolute idiots for thinking you'd be anything but a shining example of a hero."

Katsuki feels tears prick at the corner of his eyes. He grits his teeth and bows his head to hide them, wiping fiercely at his face as the hand ruffles his hair.

"Don't let this stop you, use it as a tool to launch yourself forward, show everyone what you can do."

"Yeah, okay."

His voice is thick and he has to swallow to stop any other sounds from coming out.

"And I fully expect you to take a shower before stepping into my classroom tomorrow."

"Fuck off."

Aizawa smirked, looking far more like himself than the weird

expressions he's been making for the last hour or so, but then it slides off his face like rain on glass and his face twists once more into that unreadable weird thing.

"You're a good kid, Bakugou, I don't want to see you doing this to yourself again. Is that understood?"

It shouldn't have been a shock, but it was.

Katsuki blinked as he stared at his teacher uncomprehendingly.

Aizawa thought *he* was a good kid.

Slowly, he nodded, though Katsuki was never aware when these sorts of things happened so it was an empty sort of non-verbal promise he was making here. Katsuki rarely noticed he was slipping and if it happened too fast, his grounding techniques were pretty useless. Or sometimes it happened so gradually it was impossible to tell anything was even wrong.

The door clicked shut and Katsuki was left with too much dried sweat on his skin, an empty water bottle, and a half filled bowl of long cold soup in his hands. Kirishima was probably pacing somewhere. Horns and Soy Sauce and Pikachu calming his anxiety ridden ass down to a manageable level.

Aizawa is right of course.

He can't hide away from the world forever. He has to tackle things head-on. The man's words had made Katsuki suspicious though. Did UA not know about what the Hero Public Safety Commission was doing? Then again, did that matter? UA was a school. The HPSC was the government mandate for all Heroes.

It was why they handled the Examination in the first place.

An Unbiased Third Party meant to oversee heroes and make sure heroes were following the laws and regulations of the Nation and government. It was a council designed to bring structure to a body of people who were otherwise overpowered. Created to ensure there was no abuse in the system.

Still, his fingers shook as he brought out the letter to read again.

Dear Katsuki Bakugou

I've contacted the Hero Public Safety Commission with my recommendations. They too were concerned about your aggressive behavior and fear further attempts of Villains targeting you again due to your lack of demonstrative improvement. Included in this letter is a directive from HPSC Officer Yukumiru Mera highly recommending my services to you to improve your overall behavior and discipline.

As of right now, this is not mandatory, however, the Hero Public Safety Commission is hosting the next Hero License Exam in one month's time and it is our understanding that UA intends to submit all applicable students for eligibility. Including yourself. You have one month to improve yourself and pass the exam, but in the case that you fail, you will be required to undergo my suggested treatment and sessions with me twice a week.

Included in this letter is a therapeutic device for your benefit. It is up to you whether you wish to use it to your advantage but know that if you are required to start sessions with me, it will be a mandatory part of your treatment plan. It can be worn either around your wrist or ankle. It is quirk created on I-island, using both the latest in scientific discovery and applicable quirk evolution. Simply put it on and it will put out a steady white pulse to show it is on.

Taking into consideration your specific issues, we have designed the ring to emit a small shock any time your voice raises to unreasonable levels or there is a worrying amount of aggressive chemicals in your brain activity. Brain structures involved in making moral judgments are often damaged in violent individuals. Neurobiology targeting inappropriate aggressive behavior has been carefully installed so that if an individual's adrenaline, stress endorphins, and noradrenaline are all exhibiting high levels- indicating high aggression, you will receive a harsher shock to your system as a means of reminding you to calm down.

We all only wish the best for you.

There were two choices in front of him.

Let the Hero Public Safety Commission bar him from ever getting a license. Walk away from being a Hero. Choose to never use his quirk again or get a business license for it in some capacity. Live a life where he looks the other way when robberies happen. When Villains were about. Be a bystander as his friends and classmates moved on to be heroes.

Do something else with his life.

His mind is blank at the thought. What did he even do outside of training? Cooking? He could work to become a chef. Hiking. Reading. What did he like outside of that? He was smart. So there were plenty of things he could research to get involved in. He could leave the country.

That thought was a lot more appealing than Katsuki liked to think about.

Travel.

Do work traveling the world.

Get away from everyone here.

Katsuki pulled the ring out of the box, staring at the black surface with an empty feeling.

Working Hard and Never Giving Up.

Those were the only two things that most people agreed were good about him. Even fucking Deku who seemed to find fault with everything Katsuki did.

Who was he without those things?

He wants to be a hero.

He's never found anything that makes him calm and focused, happy, like being in the middle of a battle. The adrenaline that constantly

thrums through his body at all times due to his nitro finally has an outlet outside of just training. Strategizing against a tricky opponent, finding the best solution to overcoming the obstacle in front of him. Using his body to the fullest extent without fearing the building chemicals in his body is too much.

There was no talking where Katsuki was sure to fuck it up.

There was no social expectation.

It was just you and your opponent.

Katsuki felt *alive* in the middle of a battle. That cloying panic he felt while talking to people disappeared. All the expectations of doing his absolute best at everything went away. There was no measurement in battle. Everything you had and everything you were, went up against everything they were and everything they had.

Katsuki loved it.

Even scraped and bruised up, he always felt *better* at the end of a battle. The family Doctor had said it was because it was all the chemicals evening out. That the constant want to work out or fight was self-medicating or whatever.

His nitroglycerin caused his blood pressure levels to drop to dangerous levels and his body compensated with a ridiculous amount of adrenaline. Since a very young age, he and his dad had worked out a routine to make sure the adrenaline didn't overwhelm him.

Even now, with staying locked in his room for so long, the familiar ache in his body could be felt. The sweat causing his clothes to stick to his skin was too much, seeping through all of his clothes and into his sheets, which was definitely going to be a pain in the ass to deal with.

His body hurt from not exercising though when he slipped into these types of moods, it made it hard to register until he was coming out of it. At this point, his eyes were probably dilated from the excess adrenaline.

If he chose not to become a hero then this would more than likely be the norm for him. Unless he got a job that would require constant use of his quirk, unlikely as that was unless he chose to become a Villain or a mercenary. Katsuki grimaced.

Bad thought.

Horrible thought.

Fuck.

Then there was the obvious choice. The second choice. The right one.

Wear the ring.

Suck it up and deal with whatever the Commission had to throw at him for a little while. It wouldn't be forever. Do the remedial course. Go see the crazy lady. It would be like... an extreme version of Best Jeanist Agency.

Pretend.

Practice your smile.

Be... social.

He touched the blankets around him. Soft. White. Warm from him being on his bed for way too fucking long. A little damp. Gross.

It isn't like Katsuki could avoid people for the rest of his life. This was just sooner than he thought. Best Jeanist hadn't been wrong. He does need to learn how to be better with the public.

This was inevitable no matter how he looked at it as long as he was choosing to become a Hero. He'd never had a choice in the matter. He'd just thought he could ease himself into it. He doubts the Commission or the Remedial course will give him time though.

Like everything else in his life he'll just going to have to figure this shit out on his own or pretend until he gets it. The idea of pretending to get along with people sends a wave of panic through him that he viciously hammers down under his metaphorical heel.

Suck it up and deal with it.

Katsuki examined the small ring. There was no way in hell he was wearing it on his wrist for the whole fucking world to notice. He frowned down at it. It was open slightly. Inspecting it more thoroughly he noticed that there wasn't an obvious way to take it off once it closed shut. The fuckers certainly hadn't bothered with an instruction manual.

Katsuki bit his thumb as he brought it closer.

No keyhole. Though there was probably some kind of scanner on the thing. A digital lock. This was I-Island tech, after all, so it made sense that it was using the most advanced technology available for it.

He breathed deeply through his nose, trying to calm himself.

If it was a digital lock then that meant either the Hero Public Safety Commission had the digital key or the lunatic lady did. Either way it meant that when he put it on, he wouldn't be able to take it off again. It didn't worry him too much. He could always blast the fucking piece of shit off if he needed to with a very careful AP shot, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth and a nasty feeling in his gut.

He wasn't a fucking animal.

Was this part of the 'fix'? A form of humiliation? He was long accustomed to that kind of punishment. His mom always lamented in front of both strangers and friends how 'bad' of a kid he was. How hard it was to 'deal' with him, to tolerate him, how long suffering and good his mother was to have to take care of him.

How others like Kirishima and Deku were saints to put up with him.

Katsuki knew this dance.

He'd been forced to

Katsuki flipped it over in his hand. It felt like polished stone. Not metal. So at least it wouldn't irritate his skin as much. He just needed to get the fuck over it and actually do it.

Katsuki slipped it around his ankle and with a simple click it closed. As uneventful and undramatic as slipping on a bracelet. Portions of the polished stone began to glow a steady white and in the pitch black it probably looked pretty badass so Katsuki could get away with pretending it was for the sake of fashion statement rather than a the government mandated Pavlov shit it actual was. He tried to click it open again, but just as he suspected, the stone like ring remained fixed in place.

He breathed through his nose to keep the panic at bay, kept one hand clenched on the soft material beneath his hand. This was fine.

This was extreme.

It was wrong.

But whose to say it wouldn't actually work?

It would target his aggressive behavior, right? It was some fucked up Pavlov shit, yeah, but on a psychological scale, it was known to work. He wasn't a little bitch like his classmates so he could deal with this.

A little shock to remind him he was being too aggressive.

Not the end of the world.

Katsuki stood up for the first time in three days, eyes watching the soft white glow of the ring as he walked about his room. It's smooth, polished, stone like surface slid across his skin and looked no more ominous than one of his parent's models featuring ankle bracelets for the Fall Selection.

It looked more like onyx and moonstone than technology with a chemical monitoring system. No one had to know he was basically on probation. One step away from being kicked out of the hero program altogether.

On the edge of never becoming a hero.

It was bad enough they knew he was taking remedial courses. That he was known more for being the 'Beast' of 1A, the bad boy of UA High School, than as a rising hero. Known more for his failures and weakness than his talents and skills.

Maybe they were right.

Maybe this was the only way to fix things.

To fix him.

Part 2- Chapter 9: Project Katsuki Bakugou

Chapter Summary

Detective Tsukauchi's quirk is really more complicated than he likes to explain.

Kirishima tries his best.

Katsuki gets wrecked.

Chapter Notes

Part 2 is here!

Lord have mercy did this one give me a hard time. Not writing it. I have been going insane with the writing. But I have been popping all over the place with the writing. I wrote part of the end and then like six middle parts then part of the beginning... it was a mess. And then I had to tackle how I was going to order everything. Yeesh.

Please check out the amazing artwork for this fic by Anisa!

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDFOo1yF2km/>

Part 2: Post Traumatic Life Disorder



Chapter 9: Project- Katsuki Bakugou

The Night they recovered Katsuki Bakugou, or it would be better to say, the early hours of the morning, there had been no relief in the kid's body language when the kid had been brought in. Just a bone deep wariness. And when his parents had shown up? That has been a ballpark of lines along his body, few of them good.

Detective Tsukauchi's quirk had still been activating without his consent. The consequences of hours of overuse against various villains and eye-witnesses to find out where the teenager had been taken after being kidnapped.

His quirk was a much more complicated affair than most assumed. Detective Tsukauchi was known for having a quirk that revealed the

truth to him, but in all honestly, it had taken him a great many years to understand just *what* and *how* his quirk worked. The truth was revealed through lines. Lines of different thickness, different colors, different transparencies that wrapped around a person's body, visible to only him, and that was constantly changing as the person's body moved.

One aspect was body language.

A truth reading that had served him well over the years but was a pain in the ass to explain to others. How the thinness of a line meant a feeling wasn't particularly strong or how if there was more than one, it meant that feeling had become a bit of a personality trait. Like a tendency towards nervousness or apathy. How the more transparent the line was, the less truth was in it.

Truth was hardly so straight forward as to be black or white.

There were layers to it. Subtleness. Bias. Self-delusions. Trauma. So much that affected validity. And body language was just one aspect of it.

There was also what a person spoke.

The words hit his ears on a whole other level. A level he had yet to be able to fully explain to another person. How a word could feel like it burned him or so cold that Tsukauchi might literally feel like his spine had been iced over. He felt the emotions and inclinations, the intentions and half thoughts in the words spoken.

These things made Tsukauchi a powerful detective on the force. He was able to get to the heart of the matter faster than most. He'd closed many cases, but...

With a quirk that few understood and a job that demanded simple answers. Yes or no. Black or white. Guilty or not guilty. Criminal or innocent. Bad or good. Well, it meant that many were not found of him. He made things too difficult. Complicated everything he touched. Made every case a tangled web of truths instead of answers.

It had taken him a long time and a lot of enemies to get where he was today. And a lot of backing from All Might that still made him feel guilty to think about.

Katsuki Bakugou's emotions had been... a mess. His words had been true but he'd been withdrawn, refusing to give the whole truth on any

answer. Tainted with uncertainty and hurt and shame and guilt. The guilt was an odd one. An emotion in his truth that Tsukauchi had wanted to press in on. Figure out where and why it was there.

And he'd been withholding information. A lot of it, as far as he could see. Some of it insignificant to the case, but a lot of it significant to the boy. Tsukauchi had seen in his mind's eye the reluctance and shame and it had alarmed him. The League of Villains had obviously used mental mind games on the kid. That much he could tell.

And there was an odd... longevity to the lines. Things had been happening in concerns to the emotions connected for much longer than the kidnapping. Whether the Villains had been playing off of those emotions though or it was simply a coincidence, he didn't know. He hadn't had enough time and with the way he'd reacted to his questioning... well, Tsukauchi had not wanted to make the obvious trauma worse.

It didn't change the facts though.

The lines of the boy's body hadn't been consistent with the circumstances.

Shame. Exhaustion. Anger. Apprehension. Hesitance. Guilt- an overwhelming array he'd read on the boy while he'd been asking him questions still resided along his body language after rescue and only worsened at the sight of his own parents. These were not consistent with a victim that had been removed from the situation.

The rigid lines of tension had remained when the boy's mother and father came into the police station. The second language only Tsukauchi could see reading "resignation" for a longer fight. The stiff way he was holding himself was uncomfortable. The folded arms in front of his body read 'defensive'- there was an expectation in those lines, a watchfulness for what the woman would do next. Not the man. Bakugou's eyes never even glanced at the man. They were laser-focused on the woman in a way that left a bad taste in his mouth.

And then Katsuki Bakugou's eyes had rolled into the back of his head.

The kid had fallen like a puppet with its strings cut. The father crying out in horror, running forward, but not quite fast enough. A nearby officer had thankfully grabbed the kid before he hit his head. A medic looked the boy over and had declared exhaustion to be the cause.

There was something about that limp body though that set him on

edge more than any of the other signs.

Bakugou hadn't seemed that bad off when they'd talked. He would never have asked the kid to answer questions if he'd known. The kid had held himself together well. Even Tsukauchi's quirk, while it had picked up on the tired way the boy held himself, had not picked up on the imminent collapse. That spoke of a long term experience in dealing with fatigue that was unhealthy.

His pupils shrunk back down and as his eyes watered from overuse, the analysis quirk fell away. The lines visible to Tsukauchi disappeared. He made a move to follow the family, to speak to them more when Officer Tenhiko stepped up to him.

"The Firefighters in District Three have been overwhelmed! You have the contact to District Six, right?"

He turned his attention away to more urgent matters.

Kamino had kept him swamped. Buried in paperwork and Villain attacks following the retirement of his long time friend.

That didn't mean he'd forgotten.

Detective Tsukauchi wasn't convinced that things were as straightforward as they appeared on paper. Things didn't add up for him. For one, why had the League of Villains been so convinced that Katsuki Bakugou would join them? A student from the Hero Course, first in the Exams, one of the top students. No negative records outside of some minor roughhousing in middle school.

Toshinori had told him how dedicated the boy was to becoming a hero. His best friend had explained to him how every time there was an obstacle in front of Bakugou, the boy smiled, quite savagely, as he tore it down. Facing it head on. Toshinori had told him how Katsuki Bakugou thrived in the face of challenges and the more difficult a task appeared to be, the more excited and passionate the kid became.

While Tsukauchi could see how the general public, so often blinded by first impressions and false information, could look upon these traits as Villainous, it was Tsukauchi's experience that it more pointed to

someone whose will was not easily tarnished. A thirst for intellectual and physical challenges was neither good nor bad. It all depended on how it was focused, and it seemed pretty damn clear what direction the kid was going.

Of course, Tsukauchi had the benefit of his quirk, seeing how a person felt not just what they said or what they did. Which meant when Bakugou had made his speech garnering the dislike of the nation on national television, he'd had the benefit of seeing the determination to prove himself in the way the kid stood. The desire that screamed out at him to be seen. There was someone out there Bakugou was trying to prove his worth to and it hadn't been himself or the people in the crowd. There was a confidence there too, the lines circling the boy had spoken of hard work and dedication, an in depth knowledge of his quirk.

The detective could have gotten a better reading in person, but it had been enough that he'd secretly put down a decent amount among his Officer buddies that the kid would make it to the Final Three.

They never learned not to bet against him.

Once upon a time he'd felt bad about it, but really, at this point Tsukauchi was doing the good deed of investing their money into good things instead of having it wasted by them losing it somewhere else. Gullibility was a trait rarely worked through.

As the Head Detective in the case regarding the League of Villains, he was certain that there had been a specific reason they'd targeting Katsuki Bakugou, not just because they believed he'd be willing to join them, but because they had a task in mind that the student would be able to provide an advantage towards. Finding out what that reason was would be important in their take down of the LOV, he was sure, but there was also something else bothering him.

That family reunion.... Dysfunctional families weren't exactly abnormal. Katsuki Bakugou wasn't even living in the Bakugou household anymore. He'd been moved into the UA dorms, so really, it wasn't a priority as the kid was as safe as he could be, but...

It didn't sit well with him.

Despite working on High Profile Criminal Organizations, he'd set aside a file specifically for the kid. When questioned about it, he'd used the excuse of suspected further ties, and this had the added bonus of offering unlimited resources for the side investigation. The more he

researched though, the more he found that it was justified and not in a good way.

His investigation into Katsuki Bakugou had led him into some startling developments. The Medio Outlets, for one, had developed into a rather dangerous picture. He would have to contact Principle Nezu at UA. This had gone beyond a simple bad reputation. There were clear threats here that he would have to dispatch officers to investigate.

Another concerning problem, he was being halted at odd places.

Katsuki Bakugou's phone had been shut off, for one.

The Bakugou's were not allowing the police to see their son's phone records. He wasn't sure what to make of that. He hadn't expected to find anything of importance there, but now he was positive this would be a vital show of information in one way or another.

His suspicions that something had been wrong the night they'd come to pick up their kid from the Police Station felt validated now. He'd thought maybe it had been his own exhaustion at that time. An overworked quirk and a frazzled mind.

Now though...

Detective Tsukauchi knocked on the Bakugou's front door. The couple were involved in Design and this was the first time he'd been able to confirm they were actually in the country which was one of the reasons this smaller investigation outside of his LOV case had come up against so many walls.

There was a timeline on his desk with a suspicious amount of trips made out of the country and no one that appeared to have been watching their son at those times. Which meant that for the past 3 years? It looked as if Katsuki Bakugou had been primarily on his own.

Which wasn't illegal per say...

Katsuki Bakugou would have been thirteen at the time and according to the Laws of this district a pre-teen could be left on their own for up to three days. At fourteen that time frame went up to five days and at fifteen, they were considered a young adult, and could be left at home (given appropriate basic necessities were met) for up to two weeks.

These laws were in place with the expectation that it would be used sparingly. What the Bakugou's were doing, while within the realm of

the law, was well into neglect and if Katsuki Bakugou were still living at home, he would have already filed for a Case Worker to come by. As it stands... with the involvement of the LOV, he had to be more cautious if he wanted as much information as possible and Katsuki had already been taken from the household.

He wasn't sure how receptive the kid would be to him either, since the last time he'd spoken with Katsuki, he'd lost control of his quirk a few times, startling and scaring the already wary teenager who'd just escaped a kidnapping. Not the best of first impressions.

The door opened.

Standing there in the entranceway was Masaru Bakugou.

Eijiro saw Bakugou walk through the 1A Dorm's entrance, taking his earbuds out and breathing heavily from a run. His third one today, if Eijiro isn't mistaken. He shares a worried glance with Ashido and Sero. Before breakfast. During lunch. And now, even after they'd done hero training, even after a day full of classes, he was going out again.

"Yo! Bakugou!" Eijiro stood up and waved.

Making sure to telegraph his movements. He waited until the glazed, far off look in his best friend's eyes disappeared, and the red irises began to focus on him. Bakugou looked calm, relaxed, and Eijiro held out his hands up so that Bakugou could track his arms with his eyes.

To be honest...

Eijiro figured this all out by trial and error. There's an inkling in the back of his mind, little alarms that tells him there's only bad reasons why this is the way his best friend is, but Eijiro doesn't want to pry. He's not sure Bakugou could tell him if he asked a direct question anyways. It seems like one of those things that you slowly learn the answer to by the words that slip out here and there rather than a cause and effect answer. What he knows is that Bakugou is perfectly okay with touch if certain steps are taken, if he's aware, if he can see you, if he can track you, if you make your movements obvious.

Eijiro grins despite these thoughts.

As the blonde is turning towards him, eyes watchful, Eijiro rushes

forward, bending down, and grabs the guy by his legs, throwing him over his shoulder. Bakugou snarls at him. He hardens. The instinctive, expected nitroglycerin fueled blast hits him in his face. Leaving nothing but ash behind on his cheeks.

“What the fuck?” The snarl is right next to his ear as he throws Bakugou over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Come eat with us!” Eijiro invites him as he walks towards the kitchen table. “Sero made waffles.”

Bakugou, like the nimble pissed off cat he is, gets his legs around Eijiro’s neck and swings his body down towards the ground to use momentum against Eijiro’s hardening. They both hit the floor with a ‘boom’ and they’re a tangle of limbs as Eijiro laughs, wrestling Bakugou closer and closer towards the kitchen.

“Piece of shit...” He hears Bakugou muttering under his breath as he shoots off mini-explosions, but he doesn’t say ‘let me go’ so Eijiro knows its okay.

He pins Bakugou to the floor. Using just enough strength to let his friend know that if he taps out, then Eijiro will let go in an instant. The blonde instead brings his legs together, folding them like an origami paper in the narrow space between them and slams them into Eijiro’s stomach. He grunts, his hold on Bakugou’s wrists loosening just enough that he’s able to wrench them free.

They wrestle, grunting and laughing as Eijiro throws Bakugou around like he weighs nothing and Bakugou using his explosions and flexibility to toss him about the place like he doesn’t weigh a literal ton in his hardened form. They’re nothing but a pile of rolling arms and legs that, much to Eijiro’s delight, land right on the kitchen floor.

At Ashido’s feet.

“We’ve got blueberries and strawberries for your waffles...” Ashido singsongs as she leans over them, winking at Bakugou.

Bakugou, simply on principle of being a little bitch, sends one more blast into Eijiro’s face and then using said face as a balancing tool to stand up and dust himself off.

“Raspberry syrup?” Bakugou asks, sitting down at the table.

“Destroying the very foundation of what waffles stand for,” Kaminari

mutters as he joins them, stepping over Eijiro like his body hasn't been laid out in the middle of the kitchen as a casualty.

No offer of help standing up.

What a load of bull.

These people are supposed to be heroes.

Ashido, bless her acidic heart, offers him a hand up. He takes it. Her grin infectious as she hands him a plate Sero made for him. Waffles with strawberries and whip cream. Bakugou looks disgusted at his plate.

"This is supposed to be dinner, not a desert," he gruffs.

Kaminari sighs dramatically, sitting down with his own waffles, chocolate chips bursting from inside.

"There is no way you can make Waffles healthy," Kaminari points out, quite fairly. "No matter how you dress up a Waffle, it's still a waffle. Bad for you. Might as well do it right if your gonna eat it."

Bakugou pauses, his gaze considering before he shrugs and nods.

Which is as close to conceding a point as anyone ever gets from him so Kaminari grins and fist bumps Sero.

"Hand me the 'pretending to be healthier' version of sugar syrup," Kirishima calls happily. The raspberry is handed to him easily enough and he pours it on liberally, painting whip cream and crispy brown a bright pink color. Bakugou looks pained at his plate before sighing and shoving waffles into his mouth.

"Hope you shits enjoy this. We're eating healthy for the rest of the week," Bakugou mutters under his breath.

"I feel like that's a threat," Kaminari stage whispered, leaning heavily against Mina as she joined them at the table. "We're gonna get Brussel sprouts, aren't we?"

"Cut that shit out," Bakugou snapped. "You don't have to treat healthy food like it's a fucking disease. You can make anything taste good if you cook it right! And everything," Bakugou gestured to the plate of waffles, "is healthy if you have it in the right quantity. Sugar is good for you as long as you aren't eating it every god damn day. Salt is

good for you when done sparingly. Carbs are great for people like us! It's about balance. That's why diets fail people because they treat it like a fucking 'fix it' deal that's meant to last only a small amount of time. Lifestyle choices and habits are what make being healthy stick!"

Kaminari's face was smushed up as he stared at Katsuki with his hands supporting his face, elbows on the table.

"Wow. You're like... our own grumpy guru, aren't you? If we shake you like a magic eight ball, do you think you can spout out dating advice next? Or is that too far into the 'getting along with people' category for you to be able to cover? ACK!"

He absolutely deserved the strawberry-shaped bruise forming on the side of his face.

"So..." Sero spoke up, his familiar wide smile faltering a bit as he speared his blueberries into the heard of his waffle. "You're starting your other classes tomorrow, right? What have they told you about it?"

The table went silent.

Even Kaminari looked to have taken a deep interest in salt and pepper shakers (A white and black cat set that they'd come to the conclusion had definitely come from Aizawa Sensei's home even if the man had coolly denied the accusation). Eijiro glanced at Bakugou whose eyes were narrowed into slits as he stared down at his own plate.

It wasn't good to ignore the elephant in the room but...

They hadn't seen what Eijiro had seen.

That had scared him.

"What's there to tell?" Bakugou sneered, stabbing his waffles with too much force. The glass clinked loudly in the quiet space between them. "It's three days a week for fucking ever."

"Have they told you what you'll be doing?" Ashido asked, her voice soft, quiet.

A few pops went off in Bakugou's hands, turning the silver metal red for a second and then black. Eijiro watched worriedly as Bakugou's grip didn't loosen at all, even when it looked like his fingers were burning.

And then he flinched.

Jerking in place and his breath hitched.

“Bakugou!” Eijiro stood, staring worriedly as Bakugou dropped the fork, staring down at it like it had personally offended him.

“Shit dude,” Kaminari said, standing and grabbing a wash towel, rinsing it in cold water before carrying it over. “That’s not cool. Don’t do that.”

Bakugou glared, grabbing the towel and gingerly putting it to his fingers.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bakugou muttered under his breath. “It will just be the same shit as always.”

“It will probably be rescue stuff,” Sero said, rummaging around in the cabinets for the Neosporin and bandages they started keeping in there the third time Midoriya burned himself trying to cook. “You know... since that’s the part of the exam you guys failed at.”

Bakugou flinched again, jerking hard enough that the table moved.

“Sero, dude,” Kaminari whispered.

“It’s not good for you to ignore it like you have, man,” Sero said resolutely. “You haven’t talked to anyone about it. I don’t want us to pretend like you didn’t lock yourself in your room for almost three days because of this. I don’t want us to walk around eggshells with you and pretend like everything is honky dory when it’s *not*. You scared us.”

“Sero’s right,” Eijiro said reluctantly. “I know you’re not big on the whole sharing your feelings thing but... that was bad. Like, that was really fucking bad, bro.”

“Tch,” Bakugou pressed the cloth harder into his fingers.

“How would you feel if one of us pulled a stunt like that?” Ashido asked.

“Don’t blow things out of proportion,” Bakugou dropped the cloth, fingers red and irritated, but no blisters, probably because of his quirk. Built up resistance to heat, no doubt. He cut his waffles up aggressively as they watched him, the scraping of metal against glass

unpleasant.

“Don’t think of it as a setback,” Eijiro told him, trying to bring an upbeat note to the conversation. “Think of it as learning things that we won’t have an opportunity to!”

Bakugou snorted.

“You all already know how to be fake fucking assholes.”

A tense air filled the room.

“Excuse me?” Ashido hissed.

Bakugou threw his utensils down on the table, breathing heavily before glaring up at all of them.

“You are all experts in killing people,” Bakugou hissed. “You sit there wasting time, placating people, making them feel better, while victims are bleeding out because you didn’t get to them in time. Smiling and waving and acting like their best friend to make them *feel* better about their situation. You spare people’s feelings in exchange for people’s lives and that’s what everyone wants. They want you to protect their precious feelings because they think that’s more valuable than other people’s lives!”

“Jeez, once again, you’ve missed the entire point!” Kaminari said angrily. “It’s about common courtesy! You don’t have to stop and make sure every person is happy, but you do have to try to make the experience not as traumatizing as it could be! And with you its not about making the situation better, its about not making it worse! Screaming at people and telling them to suck it up is completely unnecessary! You scare people who are already scared! That’s why you failed!”

Eijiro felt his inside squirm as Bakugou and Kaminari glared at each other.

“In wide-scale catastrophes there’s a thing called priority. Babying people and trying to convince them to follow your orders and *listen* takes time. Showing that you have the authority in the room makes them do what they’re supposed to fucking do faster so that you can move on to the next group,” Bakugou hissed.

Bakugou jerked again.

Hard. His hands clenching on the table.

“And there’s a thing called humanity,” Kaminari snarled. “I think you’re missing it!”

The room went deadly silent.

And then a whistling sound broke the silence that turned into a wheezing snicker. Kaminari’s angry scowl faltered. Eijiro took an uncertain step forward as Bakugou’s head bent forward and he put a hand to his head, dragging his fingers down his face as the not laugh continued to fall out of his mouth like the last hanging shards of glass in a broken window clattering onto the floor.

“Yeah,” Bakugou said, a stretched-out thing breaking across his face. “You’re probably right.”

“I... I didn’t mean...” Kaminari stuttered, looking pale.

“He was just frustrated,” Ashido tried to explain, to interfere. “His mouth moves faster than his brain. You know that Blasty, he didn’t mean it.”

Bakugou stepped back from the table, moving around it to head away from them. Eijiro stepped forward, reaching out to grab his shoulder, to pull him back.

‘SMACK!’

His hand was slapped away, red slits glaring at him from under blonde bangs.

“Don’t touch me.”

Eijiro stared as Bakugou stomped over to the elevator, hitting the buttons too hard and folding his arms tightly over his chest as he stared pointedly away from them. The elevator doors closed smoothly, not making a sound outside of a small ‘click.’

“Damn it,” he muttered. “DAMN IT!”

“I know,” Kaminari said quietly. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“He’s the one that started it,” Ashido said tiredly. “He can’t lash out at us like that just because he can’t handle a conversation.”

“We knew he didn’t want to talk about it,” Eijiro pointed out in

Bakugou's defense.

"Just because he doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't mean that it shouldn't be talked about," Sero said. "Besides, as much as that was shitty, we have a way better idea of what the hell is going through his head than we did before, right? It's not a total mess up. Maybe he's completely incapable of having a conversation about his emotions, but he ain't gonna get better at it if we let him sit in all that..." Sero gestured to the elevator. "... all of that!"

Kaminari groaned.

"It would be nice if he could be a little less emotionally constipated. It's not good for my heart, man. His reasoning is so fucked up."

"I mean," Eijiro shrugged. "It's not like he's wrong exactly."

"He's too emotionally distant from the victims. Like, there's being logical and then there's just completely shutting off all empathy," Sero pointed out.

"What is there for him to empathize with?" Ashido sighed in exasperation. "He came back from being *kidnapped* like it was nothing. I feel like it was more traumatizing for us than it was for him! All of us... we changed. Bakugou though... its weird. He's oddly the same. Just as carefully distant. Just as meticulous in his studies. Just as gung ho about sparring and training and eating healthy." Ashido banged her fist on the table. "We *live* together guys and I feel like we interact with him the exact same amount as we did when we just saw each other at school!"

"Maybe that's the problem?" Eijiro said slowly looking up at the others. "I mean, think about it, Bakugou's *always* been like this. Isn't that weird? You're right. We do interact with him the same amount. Bakugou is oddly careful about everything he does. He doesn't go out. He keeps himself locked in his dorm room or trains. He's insanely private... Maybe Bakugou changed before any of us did and we missed it because we didn't *know him* before all of this."

The more the thought sat in his brain the more bothered by it he was.

"I mean, that kind of stuff doesn't come out of nowhere," Eijiro finished, a bit lamely. "And more than any of us, Bakugou should understand what's going on in a person's head when they are in bad situations. Maybe he's acting like this to the victims because he understands what they feel. That thing he kept repeating... about

people wasting time and people dying because of it... yeah, it's a bit mean, but is it wrong?"

"Our job is to save people completely though," Sero cut in. "We've been told over and over again that we have to take care of both the physical and mental parts of a person. It's our job as heroes."

Eijiro stared at the ground, thinking about the night Bakugou was rescued.

They'd been so happy to finally get their hands on their friend. To pull him out of that death trap. He can still feel the way Bakugou had clasped onto his hand so tightly he thought his bones might break from the pressure. He remembers Bakugou pulling away from him first chance he got.

He remembers watching All Might fight.

And when he turned back the vacant look on Bakugou's face as they ushered him to the police. The police who'd been shouting in a million different directions all sorts of instructions as they ushered him inside. The way Bakugou had staggered, not really paying attention.

Had anyone bothered to ask Bakugou if he was okay?

Or did they assume like they had, that Bakugou was fine?

The questions left a pit in his stomach and it was with a sinking feeling that he thought he already knew the answer.

Detective Tsukauchi had seen the man briefly at the police station, but his focus had been on Katsuki Bakugou whose focus had been on his own mother. The man was... unassuming. Even standing in the doorway of his own home, the mousy, brown-haired man held his arms slightly in front of him. Defensive. He kept his head slightly downwards, almost bowed, demure. Feet together, shoulders hunched, making himself as small as possible. Submissive.

"Hello, Mr. Bakugou, I'm Detective Tsukauchi, I'm head of the investigation into the League of Villains and I had a few questions for you."

Shoulders back. Spine straightening. Eyes narrowing. Mouth

downturned. Defensive, but in a protective way, for a child. Katsuki, of course. Unhappy. Resentful. Feet moving apart. Not too far apart though. Unused to taking a stance. Unwilling not to take a stance.

“My son- ” Masaru Bakugou started, voice tinged in anger, but not quite there.

“I do not mean to imply that Katsuki Bakugou was willing or receptive to the League of Villains in any way,” Tsukauchi cut in hurriedly. “Quite the opposite.”

The shoulder’s relaxed marginally, but the hesitant stance remained. The man was still unsure of him. Unwilling to let his guard down. Which meant he was not easily swayed by words. He was not as gullible as some of Tsukauchi’s coworkers then, at the very least, but the defensive way the man held himself entailed a resignation to losing fights. Mental ones, at least. That stance wouldn’t hold up to an unexpected butterfly landing on his arm.

“May I come in?”

“What more do you need to ask? You should know that Katsuki isn’t here.”

The words weren’t harsh against him at all. If anything they were tired. It felt a bit like the encounter with Katsuki Bakugou. No anger even though the words were harsh. An expectation of pressure and hurt.

“I’m not looking for Katsuki Bakugou, actually.”

Masaru didn’t move, still barring the way into the house. Odd. His status as a detective usually got him in the door pretty easily. With innocent people anyways. The first red flag flew up for Tsukauchi as he re-evaluated the man again, his quirk in overdrive now.

The truth lines before his eyes brightened to become more clear.

That same kind of wariness from before showed itself more definitively under Tsukauchi’s eye. A defensiveness. A hard line. An expectation and resignation in equal measures in their body language of bad things to come.

“The investigation is still open.” He said easily, watching intently. “There is still a chance that Katsuki could be in danger and I want to follow up on some of the leads I’ve gathered. I’ll have a better chance

of making sure your son is protected appropriately if I have your help in clarifying a few matters.”

The door opened, though the eyes that watched him seemed to still expect something... another motive? That Tsukauchi was lying?

He tipped his hat at the man as he entered the Bakugou’s home, his eyes taking in the long hallway of the Designer’s house. No picture frames anywhere. Very clean. White carpets. No stains.

“New house?” Tsukauchi asked.

Masaru shook his head.

“No. We’ve lived here for close to seventeen years now. Bought it the year we found out we were having Katsuki.”

Detective Tsukauchi paused at that.

This was not a house a child had lived in.

Especially not a child with an explosion quirk with as much passion and dedication as Katsuki Bakugou. A child who, on paper, seemed to have had full reign of the house for the better part of three years.

He looked around again.

New coffee table. Designer. A couch that was new-ish. White. Clean. No cover. Perfect condition. Sturdy furniture. Every item here was built thick. Marble. Oak. Stone. Heavy. Hard to move items. No visible damage though. There were magazines and coasters, carefully placed, but no glass items about as would feel natural in a place such as this. No figurines or decorative items. Odd for a pair of designers.

Everything was expensive but oversimplified.

The best quality but not extravagant.

The best money could buy but not *everything* money could buy.

“Would you like tea?” Masaru asked, polite even in his wariness it seems. “I was about to put on some white rose but if you prefer black or...”

“That sounds wonderful. I’ll take what you’re having.”

Masaru nodded, not the least bit perturbed by Tsukauchi cutting him

off. Used to it then. Another notch on the submissive mark. He turned his back on Tsukauchi. Different than his son in that. Katsuki Bakugou, for the entirety of the time he was at the police sanction, kept his back to the wall and refused to allow anyone to get behind him. Masaru expected wordplay, a battle of wills then, with no physical altercations.

Katsuki had been wary of all of both. Expecting both.

No pictures here in the living room either.

There was a Diploma on the wall though. A Master's degree in Business: Masaru Bakugou. A Bachelor's Degree in Fashion Design: Masaru Bakugou. Bachelor's Degree in Marketing: Mitsuki Bakugou. There were a few framed magazines on the wall with Mitsuki Bakugou on the cover. One of a much younger Mitsuki, but others more recent. A model who, even in her late thirties, clearly was still going strong in the world of glamor.

There was a fireplace with awards on the mantle.

This, at least, had a few things involving Katsuki himself.

Awards for receiving honors all throughout elementary and middle school. Certifications in Quirk Management. A few trophies for different sports. He wasn't surprised to not see the Sport's Festival medal up there though.

Masaru came back in with a tray. Steam rising from two teacups. Sugar cubes and cream on the side. Allowing Tsukauchi to make the decision's in how to make his tea rather than asking and doing it himself. Another tally towards not being the decision-maker in the house.

"Thank you," he said easily.

Masaru did not needlessly warn him about how hot the tea was nor did he offer any unnecessary explanation about the tray. He was polite and submissive, but not bumbling and he did not have a tendency to ramble which pointed towards his submissive nature being a choice or natural inclination rather than forced upon him by circumstances. The man was decisive and knew exactly what he was doing.

Masaru felt comfortable here. His body language had dropped a bit of the defensiveness. There was more control. He still carried himself with reservation and wariness, but here, in the Bakugou domain,

Masaru walked with more confidence. His arms held more apart, his feet wider spread, back straight.

“Now, what is it that you need, Detective?” Masaru asked as he sat down across from him, voice sharp. Clipped. Eyes watchful.

“I suspect that there might be more to why the League targeted Katsuki than what has thus far been assumed,” Tsukauchi got right to the point. “I’ve opened up a separate case file for your son recently. Now that Kamino has officially been cleared of all damages and All Might’s retirement ceremonies have been handled, I’ve been given more liberty and time to investigate all ties more thoroughly.”

“And you’ve found something that led you back here?” Masaru phrased it like a question, but the lines along his body pointed towards him believing it to be fact. The voice spoke of expectation.

Oh.

This one was sharp.

“Yes and no,” Tsukauchi said slowly. “It’s actually your reluctance to work with me that has me back here.”

That got a reaction.

All the lines along Masaru Bakugou’s body moved at once. Confusion. Suspicion. The elbows went in. Defensive. The mouth flattened. Distrust. Shoulders moved back. Determination and protectiveness.

“My reluctance?” Masaru said carefully.

A line of bewilderment runs along the curve from Masaru’s chin to the way he holds himself. There are other lines too. Worry runs deep, but that one is a deeply ingrained line that’s almost as thick and numerous as his veins.

“The phone records?” Tsukauchi prompted. “The police department was denied Katsuki Bakugou’s phone records back when we asked for them when your son first went missing. Mitsuki Bakugou demanded a warrant and was quite upset by our invasion of your privacy.”

Masaru’s body stilled.

The lines shifted.

The suspicion line in a tentative light red turned maroon under

Tsukauchi's eye as it turned into confirmation and betrayal. Masaru hadn't known, but the moment the line of questioning had begun he'd figured out where things were going even if he hadn't quite believed it.

The mouth moved downward. Anger. Subtle. Stiff body movements as the man attempted to be casual, taking a sip of his tea. Buying time. Thinking. Eyes shoot to the kitchen. There's something there.

"Mitsuki denied you Katsuki's phone records?" Masaru asked slowly. Thinking. Calculating. Under his eyes Tsukauchi watched the lines shift again. The inflection in his voice was indignation. Not quite that. But close. Something hidden beneath the surface that he could almost see. Something that had been there for a long time.

A dark light entered Masaru's eyes. The wariness had turned to a dying flame. An ember going out. That was a rare sight to see for his quirk. The hope of a person disappearing. Tsukauchi shifted, uncomfortable. It was his job to get to the truth, it was his *quirk*, but it was never easy to see others come to terrible realizations right in front of him.

"Katsuki didn't want to take his phone with him when he moved into the dorms," Masaru admitted, his voice quiet, distant. Lost in thought. "I thought it was because of..." The man shook his head. "You believe there's something there then? In the phone records?"

"I do."

A hard look entered Masaru's eyes as he looked up. The lines shifting again. Moving in much more rapid succession than Tsukauchi was used to. A fierce protectiveness shot forward through all the lines along the man's body. Tinged in anger and resentment and betrayal.

"Then I will get you those phone records. I'll give you Katsuki's phone too if you think that will help you at all."

The words felt earnest against him. Desperate. The man was making up for something. Whispers of truths hiding just under the surface rose up like a wave. Lukewarm. Which meant there was a steady stream of both good and bad under that surface of words.

"It will," Tsukauchi said carefully, trying to hide his own surprise.

He had not expected this to be so easy.

It was never that easy.

Masaru Bakugou nodded, his own phone whipped out and dialing before the detective could take another sip of his tea. Within a few minute's time the phone records were sent to his work email. Katsuki Bakugou's phone in his pocket. His tea was gone by time they'd finished up. Masaru's left forgotten and cold. A golden liquid with herbs floating at the bottom.

A small man with a mousy demeanor, but every line now was tight. Ready and prepared for a fight. That protectiveness from earlier was back, lined with a bone tiredness and shame, hand in hand.

Masaru Bakugou had failed to protect someone before and expected to fail again. That much was obvious in the words and lines of his body. The truth only visible to Tsukauchi. A deep line that was newer also ran along the protectiveness though. A glimmering determination that was thin and wavering. Long but easily broken.

This was a man not used to being brave, but who was trying his best to force himself to be.

Tsukauchi could admire that even if he wasn't sure it would last or sustain itself.

For now this man was on his side.

Masaru brought out a phone that had some damage on its surface. No cracks though. Black with a white skull on the back of it, in the corner. The screen was dark. The phone clearly dead.

"Now, what have you found out about my son," Masaru Bakugou demanded, for once the lines revealing themselves to Detective Tsukauchi clear as day in their truth. A man wanting to fix something. "What did the League of Villains see that I didn't?"

Katsuki fiddled with the broken pen left on the table, putting it back together again and taking it apart as the room continued to remain empty and quiet around him. He had barely made it halfway through first of his and Todoroki's 'extra' lessons when Mera Yokumiru had pulled him aside. The sleep-deprived worker had led him to one of the

many lounge areas in the building and had left him there without any further information.

When the door finally opened, Katsuki glanced up and snorted, covering his laugh with one gloved hand.

Dr. Himari Kobayashi was everything Katsuki had expected. A pristine business suit and rectangular glasses at the end of a stern face with hair pulled back tightly in a bun, a few flecks of grey here and there. A little too thin, a little too bony, but ordinary in every way. Even when Katsuki tended to use the word 'plain' to describe Sero at least his friend had his quirk and his smile to make him stand out, his tallness to lord over their classmates.

This woman had nothing.

Katsuki set the fixed pen down on the table and let his hands fall into his lap, clenching them as he watched her sip at her coffee, taking her time as she settled. This was someone who knew they'd won the battle and now had all the power.

"I'm glad we could finally meet face to face, Katsuki," Kobayashi said sweetly. "I would have liked to have met you long before this, you know."

She let the statement hang between them, her eyes glancing at him with both eyebrows raised. Expectant. Katsuki wasn't willing to give her the satisfaction of him replying to that. Her eyes narrowed and she pulled out her pad of paper writing down on it.

"Uncooperative, even now, I see. Yokumiru told me that he checked to make sure you were wearing our therapy ring. I'm glad to see that you, at least in this one action, are choosing to follow directives."

She marked something on her page.

"As you are aware, you are here because of your extreme aggressive behavior, your unsociable disposition, vulgar nature, and all around lack of Heroic Demeanor that cannot go unchecked. It was my recommendation that you be removed from the Heroic Curriculum altogether and be barred from all programs in this field, however," she looked him over her glasses, eyeing him from his boots to his scowl, "the Public Safety Committee sees promise in you and would like to give you a second chance rather than outright expulsion. You have a choice here Katsuki, at any time you may bow out from this therapy and the extra classes or you can choose to be uncooperative with me,

either will end in you not being allowed to attain a license, now or in the future. Do you understand?”

Katsuki’s scowl deepened, but he nodded, already feeling emotionally drained even though things had just gotten started.

“Good. Today is going to be simple. We’re going to discuss goals and some easy steps to attain those goals. Does that sound acceptable?”

Katsuki’s lips pressed together, he nodded again.

“Now, I think we can both agree that your vulgar nature is a bit of a problem, do you know why?”

“Because people prefer simple, pretty words?” Katsuki asked sarcastically.

“Our words represent our moral fiber.” Doctor Kobayashi said firmly. “Our words are like... a portrait painted of us over a lifetime. Right now, your words are not painting a good picture of you. Do you understand what sort of picture they *are* painting of you?”

The nitroglycerin on the tips of his fingers popped off. She gave them a hard look, the grey slates that made up her irises trailing his fingers to his face. He knew what she wanted him to say. He knew what she wanted him to admit out loud in the space between them. He tucked his arms under his armpits, shrugging and looking away from her.

“A Villain,” she finally said. “It paints you like a villain. So we’re going to tackle the language you use before anything else. I took the liberty of writing out the list of vulgar words you used at the Sport’s Festival, it’s quite extensive.”

She pulled out a paper.

His lips twitched. She really had written out everything from ‘Die’ to ‘Motherfucking shit balls’ in that familiar fancy lettering of hers. Every word that could be contrived as ‘negative’ sat on that paper. Basically his entire preferred vocabulary sat on that paper.

“These words are inappropriate for a hero. Our first goal here is to cut them out of your vocabulary. To strive to be a better person first and a better hero to be second. Now, Katsuki, you care about winning, right?”

“What’s the fucking point of trying to be something if you don’t aim

for the top?" Katsuki demanded. "I don't half-ass anything, so yeah, I care about winning."

Her lips pursed.

"Do you know what my quirk is?" She asked, setting the paper on the coffee table between them, right next to the fixed pen.

"I haven't cared enough to learn *anything* about you," Katsuki said snarkily, even though he was 95% sure he was going to regret the fuck out of that shit.

"Arrogance does not befit a hero." She said, looking down on him as she straightened. "My quirk is called 'Association' and is perfect for therapy in dealing with hard cases like yourself. Now, give me your hand."

Katsuki eyed the pale palm held out to him to take.

"What's going to happen when I do?" He asked warily. There were about ten alarm bells going on in his head not to take that hand, but there was very little choice here. Still, he'd rather read the paperwork, so he knew how he was being fucked then just sign shit and not know how he was going to be fucked.

"I will go down this list with you, all these vulgar words, and for each one I will create an image and feeling- an association, that will enter your mind when you speak the word out loud. At first, it will be hard, but from what I've heard, you're a young man of high intelligence, I'm sure that your habits will adjust rapidly in a matter of weeks."

"I thought this was supposed to be therapy... talking and shit," Katsuki said, a tinge of panic encroaching on him as he leaned as far back from her as possible.

"It's not permanent," Doctor Kobayashi assured him, that smile still in place, her hand gesturing for him to take it. "My quirk's effects have to be applied weekly and I will use *association* on different matters as we tackle them. Once your vulgar language is overcome, we will move on to another matter. If you start to fall back into this particular issue again then we will revisit it, of course, but we can take this one problem at a time. My goal is to help you, Katsuki, not hinder your progress."

Katsuki still didn't want to take the hand.

This didn't feel right.

He felt like a little kid being ushered into the car of a stranger after being offered candy. He felt like he was being duped, scammed, lead into a trap. But he was here, wasn't he? Katsuki had failed the Provisional Hero Licensing Exam because there was something wrong with him. It wasn't like Todoroki who'd pulled a stupid stunt by having an argument with another tester rather than focusing on the Exam.

Katsuki had been focused.

He had tried his hardest.

He had tried to prioritize and be helpful and do the right thing by rescuing instead of fighting King Orca.

Katsuki had failed because of who he was not because of what he did.

With a feeling of dread, he put his hand into hers. Her veins started to light up a faint green before it spread outwards and Katsuki watched as it spread to his own veins.

"Now, listen to my words," he was struck by a floaty feeling as her tone dipped and her voice rose an octave, "when you speak the word 'Die' this is what you will see and feel."

Katsuki shuddered as he felt himself slip. He was in the Sport's Arena. He was on the ground. Round cheeks, Uraraka stood before him, she was standing in victory. He's lost. Present Mic was announcing her victory. He felt *shame* and *humiliation*. That didn't feel right. That didn't feel like him. That wasn't Katsuki. He'd respected Round Cheeks for her fighting spirit, her willingness to give it her all. This was...

Shame and Humiliation.

The feelings were overwhelming and Katsuki felt himself curling into a ball as they struck him from all sides.

"Good."

He came back to himself, staring at the woman in front of him, the therapist, instead of Round Cheeks. He didn't feel so cold, but his hand did. His hand felt like ice. He tried to pull away but there was an iron like grip on him.

“That was just the first one, dear, the first is always the hardest. We still have sixteen more words to go.”

“I don’t want to do this,” Katsuki said hastily, standing, his hand still trapped.

“Then you’re giving up on being a hero?” She asked lightly.

Katsuki stilled.

“I wouldn’t have felt that if I lost to her,” Katsuki said gruffly, staring at the wall. “I would have been pissed, but I wouldn’t have felt humiliated or ashamed. I would have been frustrated and angry not... not that.”

Dr. Kobayashi gave him a considering look.

“The validity of the feelings I create isn’t particularly relevant. They are just meant to be a deterrent to speaking the words.”

Katsuki’s face scrunched up.

“It’s fucking disrespectful to feel like that when losing to an opponent,” Katsuki snapped. “It’s disrespectful to the person who gave it their all and its disgusting for me.”

“Then after a few tries, you will learn not to say the word,” the woman said slowly. “It will give you motivation to curve your word choices. This is not a difficult task, Katsuki, the more you work for it, the easier it will be. Do you want to be a hero or not?”

She stretched out her hand towards him. He felt his heart rate pick up and a shock go through his leg again. He flinched. Gritting his teeth against the feeling. He was getting worked up too often here. He needed to calm his shit. He took a deep breath, trying to make himself chill the fuck out. She was just a normal woman, not a Villain. He shouldn’t be stressed here. He was fine.

He slid back down into his seat, staring at his own hand like it had personally betrayed him by staying fixed in its position. The green along his veins yet to fade from her touch.

“As I said before, the association will fade and it will only come up when you speak that word. It’s entirely up to you and how hard you work to improve how difficult this process will be for you. Now... shall we move on?”

With each new image placed in his head, Katsuki lost to someone else in the tournament. He knew, logically, that he'd won. He'd won the whole god damn thing. And the feelings being shoved down his throat with each one... shame, fear, pain, loss, humiliation... those weren't the feelings he would feel if these things happened.

They were so intrinsically not him that there was a disconnect.

Frustrated. Angry. Disappointed. A desire to be better and to work harder. Those feelings were more familiar and what he thought he would feel. Those were the things Katsuki knew himself to be. If shitty hair had beat him, he would have been impressed and annoyed, not... not afraid. If he'd lost to Deku... well he'd felt that before, hadn't he? And the pain and guilt that struck him down to his core wasn't Katsuki. It wasn't the bitterness he'd felt or the nervous fear he'd held at the idea of Deku following him to UA of all places.

Tokoyami.

Iida.

Todoroki.

Shinsou.

Ashido.

Aoyama.

Kaminari.

Sero.

Ibara.

Hatsume.

Yaomomo.

Tetsutetsu.

She went through every person involved in the Finals and when she ran out of those she used ones who weren't involved at all. By the end of the session, Katsuki flinched at every noise, every sound of the pen tapping against the paper.

“You'll be a little sensitive to sound for the next thirty minutes or so,

but after that, you should be just fine. I know this has been a tough session but let's go over a few more things before I let you go. Your extra classes will be held on Wednesday and Thursday from 5-8 and full days from 8-3 on Saturdays and Sundays so you and I will meet on Wednesdays, midway through lessons and on Saturdays, during your hour and a half lunch break so please remember to bring something to eat to the Saturday sessions with me. That's twice a week for this fall semester. Your Exam for the Remedial course will be had in December. After which I will give my own evaluation of your progress and will make the final decision."

The pen stopped moving.

He was handed a piece of paper.

"This is your assignment for the week. Now that we've tackled your most obvious flaw, I want you to come up with six things you want to work on about yourself. Preferably six things that you believe will make you a better hero. We'll go over the validity of your suggestions on Saturday and from there I will work with you to see what we can do about that. I might need to adjust them depending on what you bring."

She clapped her hands.

The sound causing him to jerk away.

"Sorry about that." She didn't sound sorry at all. "I am so thrilled to be working with you, Katsuki, and while I think that you are a bit of a hopeless case, I do want to do everything within my power to make you into a hero that the world can be proud of. One that you can be proud of."

Looking much like a predator plump from a meal, she pranced out of the room, leaving only the bones of her prey behind. It took a long moment for Katsuki to gather his wits from the floor and to stand unsteadily to his feet.

He joined the others reluctantly, slumping in next to Icyhot as King Orca began to dismiss them. The half and half bastard glanced at him, brows furrowed, but didn't say anything. Which was perfect for Katsuki who felt rubbed raw from the inside out.

They found Aizawa talking on the phone outside by the car. It sounded as if he was having a bit of an argument with Four Eyes, the loud, sharp voice of their classmate going on about an incident in the

common area involving Koda having a Snow White moment while he was asleep and now there was various animals about the Dorms. Iida was probably doing that stupid hand motion with his free arm while the idiots ran around trying to catch the free roamers.

Katsuki blinked, feeling oddly sluggish.

He slid into the car without a word, ignoring Icyhot when he asked a question to instead focus on the outside world. Everything was still too fresh and he didn't want to fuck up and say a word he shouldn't. He was too tired to be careful.

He closed his eyes.

Chapter 10: The Wrong Words

Chapter Summary

How Izuku and Katsuki's friendship fell apart. Social Anxiety is a bitch, especially when no one will listen to you and as a child you don't have the right words to explain your complicated emotions.

In other words:

The History of Katsuki Bakugou saying NO and everyone else saying 'what you want doesn't matter'

Note: I really wanted to do this with a few scenes in the present, but nothing quite fit. So this chapter IS all in the past but I think you guys will understand why it's so important to do it this way. So before at the beginning of the story we talked about this but with the mindset of Katsuki and his MOTHER'S relationship. This one is solely focused on Katsuki's complicated relationship with Deku.

Chapter Notes

I've been really conflicted on where I should add this because it does interrupt the flow of the story a little. But it was too long to have other scenes in it too. I decided that before we jump into the shitshow that is Katsuki's head during this 'therapy' that it was a good idea to dive a bit deeper into the relationship between our two most complicated characters.

Chapter 10: The Wrong Words

Katsuki can't pinpoint when he became more anti-social, but there were a few moments here and there that stand out more than others. Vague memories of not really liking being with other kids all day and not getting along well with others.

“...and then they were like whoosh! And then they came down with their big feet and were like ‘stomp!’ and then the bad guy was like ‘noooooo.’” Izuku fell dramatically on the ground and splayed his limbs out.

“Uh-huh,” Katsuki said, tinkering with his STEM set, carefully putting the little engine in the center and reinforcing the sides with little metal pieces.

“Kacchan, do you want to see the video?”

“I’ve already watched it with you five times.”

“But...”

“Find something new Izuku,” Katsuki muttered, glancing up at the boy.

Katsuki liked watching fights just as much as Izuku did but he didn’t like watching the same thing over and over again.

“Why don’t we watch the All Might one?”

“If you can find a new All Might video,” Katsuki said.

They’d been hanging out for a long time now and Katsuki couldn’t wait for Auntie Inko to pick the other boy up. He really wanted to work on his little robot and Izuku didn’t seem interested in it at all.

“I found one!”

The phone was shoved in his face and Katsuki frowned as Izuku sat too close, leaning against him before clicking the play button. He had to stop working on his robot. He watched the video then the three after that.

When Auntie Inko finally came and carried Izuku away, it was a relief.

Everyone around him always took his loud energy and passion and assumed that he was an extravert. They assumed Katsuki was a social butterfly. Even Katsuki assumed it.

Cause he liked being with people. He did. But for short periods of time. It was never long after involving himself in some big group that he started to feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed. He’d never admit it out loud, not to a soul, but Katsuki found out early on that he didn’t like parties. He doesn’t like being surrounded on all sides by noise. He

doesn't like being forced into too many games.

Katsuki tries to leave.

He tries to find a quiet place in the house away from the adults and the other kids, but they see him. They grab his wrist and push at his shoulders and pull him along until he's in the throng again.

He tries to explain...

"I don't want to be here," he tells his dad quietly.

Because he'll listen. His dad always listens.

"Is someone being mean to you?" His dad asks, all concern and kindness. Beside him, his mom snorts. Katsuki shakes his head, folding his arms over his chest.

"No. I just don't like it here."

"Don't be a brat," his mom whisper shouts over the music. "These are our guests. I bought a shit ton of games for you to play with too."

At seven Katsuki didn't have the words to explain that he was experiencing sensory overload. He didn't have the ability to articulate that he *wasn't* a social butterfly and that being around people for so long left him feeling 'overwhelmed,' 'panicky,' and 'exhausted.' That he needed twenty minutes by himself in a quiet area before he would feel ready to face people again.

He'd figure this shit out in middle school. A slow series of realizations. And it wouldn't be until he was in UA that he started to really put words to these epiphanies. To be able to work through it and accept, to himself at any rate, that he wasn't the extrovert everyone always called him.

Because until that point he'd just told himself to 'suck it up' and to 'deal with it' whenever he was forced into a large group. Katsuki was just being a little bitch about it. He was just being pissy, overdramatic, he needed to do better, be better. Fighting his natural instincts to shy away and to not be 'a little bitch about it.'

But at seven all Katsuki could say was:

"I hate it here. Can I just go up to my room?"

"You're so ungrateful," his mom mumbled, her eyes glancing around

the room at their gathered guests. Fashion Designers and models, businessmen and women, and their families were here. There were video games in the living room, board games on the tables, pin the tail on the donkey on the wall and more spilling out into the backyard. It was a celebration of his parent's business hitting its one-year anniversary. Mitsuki glanced at the clock on the wall. "You know how to read a clock already, right?"

Katsuki nodded, of course he did, he wasn't an idiot.

She got on her knees and pointed to the one in their kitchen.

"It's 4:16 now, you see?" Katsuki nodded. "When the clock hits 6:00 in an hour and forty-four minutes, then you can go upstairs and we don't have to see you for the rest of the night. Deal?"

An anxious ball had eaten at him, but he'd nodded anyways.

His dad had beamed at him.

"That's our little hero."

Katsuki had tried.

He'd picked one of the games outside and he'd played it with a few of the other kids, but the screaming and yells had started to make him feel shaky. He'd gone inside and tried to sit quietly on the couch, but adults had wandered in and shooed him away, taking the spot and talking business adult stuff. He'd tried sitting to the side and watching the others play video games, but a couple girls had started to pull at his arms and ask him to play Twister with them.

Katsuki glanced at the clock.

4:40.

He breathed through his nose and he tried.

It was midway through the game when he felt tears start to prick at his eyes. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be here and didn't like this. He won his game and then was the commander for the girls and the others who had joined them.

"Right hand on blue," Katsuki mumbled, sitting with his legs drawn up to his chest.

"What?"

“Right hand on blue!” Katsuki snapped, too loud. A few adults looked their way. He let a shaky breath out.

“Jeez,” one of the boys muttered under his breath, giving Katsuki a look.

His heart was pounding really fast.

There was a sick feeling in his stomach.

He flicked the little arrow again.

“Left foot on red,” he said, too loud, but not as bad as before.

He glanced at the clock.

4:42.

He wiped the wetness from his eyes, wishing he could wipe the shakiness away too. There was a weird floaty feeling he couldn’t explain. Unpleasant. If he was a baby like Deku he’d probably run away crying to his mom. But he wasn’t. He was stronger than that. He could handle this stuff.

He just had to be braver.

Better.

He flicked the arrow again.

Later, when his mom yells at him to explain himself for what happened, Katsuki can’t. He doesn’t know why he’s upset. He doesn’t know why he stopped spinning the stupid game thing. He doesn’t know why when the girl grabbed him to get his attention he lashed out and hit her.

He does understand why the boys hit him after though when the girl hit the floor and started wailing. He doesn’t blame them for the black eye or split lip he’s sporting though he knows they sure as hell blame him for their own bruises and cuts. Because Katsuki, even at seven, knows how to throw a punch.

“That wasn’t very heroic, Katsuki,” his dad whispers to him, voice disappointed.

Katsuki cries.

The best way Katsuki can explain *Deku* is that it's like having his parent's party following him around all the time.

Katsuki tries.

He tries very hard at first to explain to Deku that he is 'overwhelming' and 'exhausting' and that Deku's tendency to latch on and grab made him feel 'panicky' and 'anxious.' But Katsuki doesn't have the words so it ends up being words like:

"Don't touch me Deku!"

"Go away, Deku!"

"Leave me alone, Deku!"

"I don't want to play with you, Deku!"

And Deku tears up and he wails and he protests and he says Katsuki is being 'mean' and 'a bully' and Katsuki can't handle it. He can't handle all the emotions that Deku is. And Katsuki gets it cause he's Deku's best friend and Deku is his.

But Katsuki can't handle Deku.

The tears and the clinginess and the want to play *all the time*. Katsuki tries to make Deku follow him further back because he can't take Deku being right on his heel, right next to him, practically breathing on him he's so close. Any time he wants to be by himself Deku is there and Katsuki tries to explain but his words are wrong.

"I don't want you here."

"A hero doesn't need back up."

"Sometimes adventures are things you gotta do alone."

Katsuki starts to prefer the company of other kids because when Katsuki says go away they do. When Katsuki says 'get lost' they do. When Katsuki ditches them, they don't follow doggedly. When Katsuki says the wrong words to make them leave him alone, they don't tear up and get upset. They just leave.

And Deku doesn't understand.

And there's a small part of Katsuki that feels guilty about that, but...

He can't take it anymore.

He can't take the way Auntie Inko looks at him or the way his mom is starting to get more and more angry with him all the time. He tries to explain. Again. But the wrong words are still in his mouth and he doesn't know how to explain how he feels. The tight feeling in his chest whenever he sees Deku now because he knows Deku won't listen to him.

Deku never listens to him no matter how loudly he screams.

Most of the time he's been begging to be left alone for forever when he lashes out. And Deku is left on the ground with a bleeding eye or a hurt look and tears, and Katsuki doesn't believe the Doctors when they say Deku's quirkless because that amount of tears is unnatural and not human. It *has* to be a mutation of sometime.

Dumbest quirk ever.

And there's a part of Katsuki that gets it. Because the other kids have been refusing to play with Deku because supposedly Deku is quirkless. Deku doesn't have anyone else. Deku only has Katsuki.

But being friends with Deku is a study in failures.

Katsuki *always* ends up in trouble because Deku is Deku. Big green eyes that cry at the drop of a hat and his dad says stuff like 'attention starved' because Auntie Inko is a nurse and works a lot. Deku is lonely. Deku is shunned. Deku only has his mom who works and the other kids don't really want anything to do with Deku.

So Katsuki tries.

At first.

But the more he hangs out with him the more... attached Deku gets. And it makes his heart speed up and his hands feel shaky and he doesn't like it. Deku isn't satisfied with an hour, he wants to spend *all afternoon* with Katsuki. When he comes over to his house, Deku doesn't want to watch one movie *he wants to watch four*. When they go on field trips Katsuki is always paired with Deku and Deku doesn't seem to have an independent bone in his body because they are

together, practically at the hip, *even when Katsuki pushes and shoves and snaps at him.*

And then there is a quiet realization.

Katsuki is never going to win at this game.

Because Deku wants too much and whenever Katsuki pushes back and tries to get him to calm down or back off, everyone sees Katsuki as the bad guy. Deku isn't *like the party*, he *IS* the party.

And its 4:16 and Katsuki has to get out now before it turns to 4:50.

So he does.

And it's ugly.

He calls Deku quirkless and useless and all sorts of other things and he lashes out as hard as he can. Every time Deku tries to hang out with him Katsuki lashes out now. He wants the party to be over and there's only one way to make it end.

But...

But...

But...

Deku refuses.

Katsuki *doesn't* understand. Deku still calls him his best friend. Deku still tries to hang out with him. Follow him. Sit at his table. At the desk behind him. He still cries over everything and *every single time* Katsuki does something mean he looks at him like he's newly betrayed. Like this is something he wasn't expecting. He's surprised and hurt and...

Katsuki doesn't understand.

Deku follows him around in first grade and second grade and third grade and all through primary and elementary no matter *what* Katsuki does. He's always a stone's throw away and the anxiousness inside of him is constant now. Katsuki is never alone. He never gets time to himself. That panicky feeling and the exhaustion is practically his companions at this point.

And no one is listening to him.

They see the bruises on Deku and the cuts and the tears and stupid Deku is Deku. He tells their parents the truth as he knows it. He's just trying to be Kacchan's friend. And Katsuki wants to scream until his throat is raw.

When Izuku is nine, his mom and Mitsuki drag him and Kacchan out and about to celebrate the New Year. Normally if the two women want to hang out, they go out alone, well aware of the tension between Izuku and Katsuki.

Izuku couldn't quite figure out what his mom had been up to or what her intentions were. Inko had been adamant this year, even as wary and watchful as she was, that the four of them spend the holiday together while Masaru was taking care of a sick relative out of town.

When Izuku had asked her, his mom had simply said: "I'm sorry baby, I know its probably not how you want to spend New Years, but... there's something I have to check."

Bewildered, Izuku had gone along with it, watching as Mitsuki's car pulled up to the apartment and a silent Kacchan, sitting as far as possible on the opposite side of the backseat, was practically melding into the car door.

Kacchan refused to look at him, head turned pointedly towards the window. Izuku had sighed and hopped into the back seat. Sometimes in class they slipped naturally back into the way things used to be not so long ago. Excitedly talking about All Might or Pro-heroes or Quirks.

But it was clear that wouldn't be happening today. Kacchan looked just about ready to throw himself out of the moving car. Izuku pulled out one of his notebooks and began making notes on the new Pro-Hero who had debuted three days ago.

Fat Gum.

Reading about the new hero online had led him to making a bunch of notes about quirks that dealt with absorption and if Izuku was honest, it had shocked him by not only how many different kinds there were but all the different ways quirks like that could be used. He'd spent an entire hour just going over the details of a Businessman whose quirk

was absorbing smoke before expelling it as heat particles in the air.

It wasn't connected to Fat Gum, but it was under the same type of quirk category, and Izuku had learned that a lot of quirks could be seen from different perspectives and that he could come up with new ways to use those quirks by comparing it to other, similar types. The theories all went into his notebook. Little details that proved useful later when he was considering the application of new quirks he encounters.

Izuku learned that absorption quirks usually entailed energy. The stuff being absorbed doesn't just disappear like it never existed. At least, okay, for Pro-Hero Thirteen it did, but they were a completely different story altogether. That had to do with Black Holes and space and stuff and Izuku had to admit that a lot of the explanations he'd read about that stuff had gone over his head. But, generally, absorption quirks *did* something with what they absorbed. Fat Gum had yet to show any move that involved releasing what he absorbed but Izuku would bet anything in the world that he definitely had it in his arsenal in some way.

“Oi!”

Izuku looked up, blinking as he realized that the car had come to a stop and Kacchan was frowning at him from the car door he was holding open. He unbuckled, in his hurry almost falling out of the car instead of stepping. Kacchan just rolled his eyes at him as they joined his mom and Mitsuki who were both watching them too closely.

Like they were waiting for Kacchan to do something bad.

That thought makes Izuku feel uncomfortable.

Especially since Kacchan seemed to know it. He walked ahead of him with his head down and his hands in his pockets, slumped and trudging along like he was on a death march. Izuku winced. Why had his mom insisted on this?

Festival lights were spread out all across the mall's expansive parking lot. Vendors were selling all sorts of hot foods and drinks. Izuku got a hot cocoa. Kacchan got hot apple cider. Clutching at the sides of the cup, purposefully not putting the sleeve on it.

While Kacchan never got sick due to the medicinal properties of nitroglycerin, he was more vulnerable to hyperthermia than the rest of them. His body required him to run at a higher temperature than

most. His mom, a nurse, had explained that it was like being anemic. If it felt like it was 30 degrees to a normal person, it would feel like it was 15 degrees to Kacchan. Which was utterly fascinating, and he'd definitely dedicated several pages to noting the pros and cons of a body functioning on a higher body temperature.

It would be easier for Kacchan to produce sweat needed for his quirk to work and would mean Kacchan could handle the summer months a lot easier. Any person who had a fire or heat quirk would only make Kacchan's explosions more powerful. There was a higher chance of dehydration though, which Izuku had seen first-hand back when they were six and Kacchan passed out. That had been scary to see his friend turning to him with a wide grin of triumph after shooting a can that had been falling from super high up, only for red eyes to roll into the back of his head and fall to the ground without a sound.

"Will. You. Stop!" Kacchan hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

Izuku startled, looking at the blonde.

"If you're going to mutter like a crazy person at least do it about something other than me!" Kacchan muttered, the smile on his face wasn't really a smile at all, it was cracked, like he was one second away from losing it.

Izuku ducked his head.

"Sorry."

Mitsuki turned to him then and it had that same fake quality to it.

"You don't have to apologize to my brat, Izuku, its fine. You shouldn't be yelled at for something you can't help."

At this, Mitsuki sent Kacchan a pointed glare. The tension in the air was thick. Izuku shuffled from side to side, sharing worried looks with his mom.

"Yeah, okay, whatever," Kacchan folded his arms, being careful not to drop his cider, breathing heavily through his nose. "Can I go look around?"

"The point of going out tonight to hang out with one another," Mitsuki said, her voice was light, but there was an edge to it.

This didn't seem like it was such a good idea.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but there seemed to be something he was missing. Something everyone else knew that he didn't. Despite himself, Izuku felt irritated at that. His mom had a habit of treating him like he couldn't handle anything. He hated that. Everyone always treated and talked to Kacchan like he was a grown up and talked to Izuku like he was a little kid. Like he didn't understand things. Like he was fragile.

They spent the next little bit looking through the vendors, both inside the mall and outside, they all relaxed a bit more as they browsed around and enjoyed themselves. Though there were a few stores they walked past that he was sure Kacchan would want to go in, but the blonde made no move to suggest them.

Actually, so far that night, Kacchan hadn't suggested any stores.

They'd gone into a few shops for his mom and Mitsuki. Izuku had dragged them all into a Comic book store and Superhero merchandise stores. Now they were inside of a bookstore in the mall when the temperature had dropped again.

Kacchan was still acting weird.

Quiet.

He hadn't spoken up about *anything* all night.

Izuku stopped when he saw a familiar series.

It was one that was way more violent than his mom would ever allow him to read. He wasn't sure what it was about but it had been shelved in the adult fantasy section. There were bodies all around what looked like a superhero but couldn't be. The adult books weren't even shelved at their school and the local librarian at their neighborhood library was kind of annoying when it came to checking out adult books. Izuku had tried to check out some of the books he saw Kacchan reading just because he was curious and had been turned away. Which meant that Kacchan probably bought his books.

But this, at last, gave him a reason to actually talk to Kacchan instead of the awkward glances and distant shuffling they were doing.

"Hey! It's the books you like!" Izuku called out, garnering the blonde's attention.

Kacchan glanced over, spotting the familiar covers and walking over,

grinning a bit.

“Hell yeah,” it was muttered quietly, so unlike Kacchan.

Like he was afraid of being overheard.

His fingers slid along the spines before he picked up one further along in the series that said ‘Ex-Purgatory.

“What’s it about?” Izuku asked.

“Its about a hero facing down the Zombie Apocalypse,” Kacchan told him. “So its Superheroes AND Zombies. *Badass.*”

“Why do you like Zombies so much?” Izuku asked, leaning over to see the cover more. Now that he knew it was about Zombies, the dead bodies all over the place made a lot more sense.

Kacchan rolled his eyes.

“Because the dumb people always die. The main guy is usually pretty clever. It’s basically a free for all for kicking ass.” Kacchan shrugged. “And because its scary. There’s not really any other type of story where it’s the whole freaking world that’s against you. And the ones that survive are usually the ones that most people don’t like...”

Kacchan paused at that, staring down at the book with a frown.

“*You* probably wouldn’t like these books,” Kacchan said, his face scrunched up in an odd way.

“Why not?” Izuku asked.

“The characters aren’t really... They don’t look at the world like you do. There’s not a lot of hope in it. I don’t think you’d relate. They don’t dream. They get things done.”

“I feel like your insulting me.”

At this, Kacchan looked thoughtful before moving his hand in a so-so gesture.

“It’s about halfway between an insult and a compliment. Take it however the fuck you want.”

Izuku clucked his tongue, giving Kacchan a dry look.

The cursing wasn't really new, but Kacchan had gone from doing it a little here and there to doing it a lot more lately and as he eyed the book Kacchan was opening up and starting to read, he had a vague idea of why that was.

"Why do you like scary books?" Izuku asked.

The hands holden the book tightened and Kacchan gave him an annoyed look.

"Because I do."

"That's not really..."

"Deku," Kacchan said tensely. "Leave it."

"But..." Izuku sighed. "What other types of books do you like?"

"The kind that are none of your business."

"I'm just trying to talk to you," Izuku huffed before adding under his breath. "You don't have to be mean."

Kacchan tensed up, shoulders hunching all the way up to his ears.

"Listen here, you shitty nerd," Kacchan hissed, his voice tight with anger. "did you question why our moms want to go out tonight?"

"Of course, I did."

"They want to see how we act around each other for themselves. You're their precious little angel. They don't see you as a fucking stalker or any of the other shit you pull."

Izuku frowned.

"I don't..."

Kacchan waved his hand.

"What the fuck ever. I don't care. The point is that tonight isn't about you. It's about me."

'Of course, it is,' Izuku thought in exasperation. A touch of anger making him frown. Everything was always about Kacchan.

"Don't make that face!" Kacchan snapped. "You don't get it! Tonight

has to be perfect. It doesn't matter what *you* do tonight 'cause they aren't judging you. I'm pretty sure you could set the Christmas tree on fire and they'd coo at you."

Izuku made an indignant sound in his throat.

"So just... for once don't follow me or talk to me, just... for tonight keep your distance."

"I can't make you talk to me, Kacchan," Izuku pointed out, resentfully.

He couldn't make Kacchan do anything. And it wasn't fair that once again Kacchan was demanding Izuku act a certain way to appease him. Those familiar red eyes dug into him for a long moment and something flickered there that Izuku couldn't identify. That cracked grin spread across his face again.

"I'm so fucked."

The laugh that wheezed out of Kacchan's mouth wasn't very nice.

Kacchan ended up buying the book. It must be nice, to just be able to buy whatever you want. Just another advantage Kacchan didn't seem to even realize he had over him. He looked at a lot of the Hero Merchandise longingly. There were a number of rarer items available because of the holidays and his fingers itched to add them to his collection but Izuku was allowed maybe one thing tonight depending on the price.

He watched as Kacchan browsed. Auntie Mitsuki throwing random clothes at Kacchan to try on and then buying them for him when she approved of what it looked like. Training gear. A couple more books.

"Can I wait out in the car?" Kacchan asked on their way to the food court. "I'm not hungry."

"It's too cold," Auntie Mitsuki said automatically.

"We've been here for hours," Kacchan pushed in that voice that was too carefully calm.

"Don't whine, Katsuki," Auntie Mitsuki snapped.

Izuku covered his mouth to stifle the snicker.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Kacchan announced. Auntie Mitsuki gave him a suspicious look, frowning at her son in an odd way.

“Can’t you wait until after we order food?” she demanded.

“I’m not hungry,” Kacchan repeated, an edge to his voice now.

Izuku glanced at his mom, the confusion he felt reflected in her eyes as well.

“Katsuki,” Inko said carefully, the wariness she’d had all night giving way slightly to her natural worry. “We’ve been out all day. You really should eat something.”

Kacchan ignored everyone and headed to the bathroom.

“Oi!” Auntie Mitsuki called. “Don’t be so rude, you brat!”

His mom started to fret, pulling at her sleeves as she looked between Kacchan and Auntie Mitsuki.

“We can order something at the food court for him for later,” Inko tried to placate. “I’m sure he’ll eat it if it’s in front of him.”

“If he wants to be a pain in the ass then he can starve,” Mitsuki said hotly. “Come on, just because he’s being difficult, doesn’t mean the rest of us have to pay for it.”

They grabbed food and a table at the edge of the food quart closest to the bathrooms so Kacchan would be able to find them easily. His mom and Auntie talked about an older patient his mom was fond of, a cranky old man who ended up at the hospital once every few weeks because of his back issues and who had a spinal quirk that made his exoskeleton a complicated case to deal with.

Thirty minutes past by.

He saw Auntie Mitsuki frown, checking her phone and glaring in the direction of the bathrooms.

Forty minutes past.

They finished the rest of their food. The conversation was still smooth, still going strong, but now all three of them were looking in the direction of the bathrooms. Izuku excused himself, trying to be as subtle as possible about going to check on him but from the fond way his mom smiled at him, he guessed he probably hadn’t pulled that off.

It was easy to see where Kacchan was the moment he opened the door. Past the urinals and taking up the handicap stall at the back, he

could see Kacchan sitting on the floor, the bags around him. The top half hidden by the stall.

“Kacchan? Are you okay?”

No response.

He eyed the stall door worriedly. It didn't look like Kacchan had moved at all at his voice.

“Are you really that bothered by the idea of hanging out with me that you'd rather hide in the bathroom all night?” Izuku questioned, feeling hurt despite everything. “Can't we just talk?”

Silence answered his words.

“Kacchan? Seriously, are you okay?”

That cracked laugh filled the space between them.

“Didn't I ask you not to follow me?” Kacchan asked. It lacked the usual anger though. Tonight it just sounded tired.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Izuku asked, hearing his own voice waver. All he'd ever tried to do was be nice. All he'd ever wanted was to be his friend.

“You're so fucking arrogant,” Kacchan snapped. “You always think everything is about *you*.”

Izuku blinked at the door in front of him.

Because *what*?!

Kacchan was acting like *he* was the arrogant one?! Izuku scoffed. The sound echoing in the quiet of the bathroom.

“Why are you always such a *jerk* about *everything*?” Izuku returned, glaring at the bathroom stall. “I only came in here to help you.”

“That's what makes you arrogant,” Kacchan seethed on the other side of the door. “The idea that *you* could help *me*. As if you've ever helped.”

The sting of those words left Izuku faltering.

“We're *never* going to be friends, Deku, you should get that through

your thick skull.”

“We were friends,” Izuku cut in. “You can’t deny that we were friends once.”

“And *you* can’t hold onto that. You can’t keep acting like that’s still the case.”

Izuku bit his lip.

“I just don’t understand why you stopped...” Izuku trailed off.

Silence sat between them, much stronger than the stall door.

“Because you’re quirkless.”

Izuku stills.

“Don’t you get it?” Kacchan hisses from the other side of the door. “You will never be a hero. There’s no such thing as a quirkless hero. You go around muttering under your breath like a creepy shit and write obsessively about stuff you will never be. You’re a loser whose too delusional to recognize that something is beyond your ability. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Izuku pressed his hand over his mouth and turned away. Wiping frantically at his eyes to stem the flow of tears.

“That’s not fair,” Izuku whispers, his voice thick.

The other kids said stuff like that all the time. Kacchan did every once in a while, joining in with the others, but he’d never... he’d never said it to Izuku like this. He’d never spoken to him like this when they were alone.

“Boo hoo, I’ve tried over and over again to be fair and you won’t *listen*,” Kacchan hissed.

“I hate you,” Izuku whispered, but in the empty bathroom his words were clear to hear.

He turned on his heel and left.

When he got back to the table, he gave his mom a watery smile, she stared at him wide eyed. Auntie Mitsuku looked like she was breathing fire as she stood up. The woman marched over to the men’s room and walked right in and Izuku didn’t have it in him to feel sorry

for Kacchan.

“Izuku, are you okay?” His mom asked him, her hand wiping away his leftover tears.

“I’m fine.”

“What did he do?” Inko asked him.

“He didn’t do anything. He just said something mean,” Izuku said weakly.

“And what did he say?” Her fingers lifted up his chin and he stared into his eyes.

“Just what all the other kids say,” Izuku mumbled. “That I’m quirkless and that I’ll never be a hero.”

He shrugged.

Her lips pressed tight together, staring off at the bathroom.

“Okay,” she said, then more drawn out, more quiet. “Okay.”

When Auntie Mitsuki and Kacchan come back out, Kacchan doesn’t say a word. Izuku is confused by the careful once over his mom does, like she’s checking for injuries. Inko looks almost grim when she doesn’t find any.

His mom’s eyes go hard when she looks at Katsuki now, like she’d found what she was looking for.

Izuku tries not to look at Kacchan the rest of the night.

The good cheer they’d had is all but gone and they unanimously decide to head out for the evening. Kacchan throws his bags into the trunk and all but adheres himself to the other side of the car which is fine with Izuku. He doesn’t want to be near Kacchan either.

It’s not until Izuku leans over to grab his bag that Kacchan looks at him. Izuku almost jerks back at what he sees. He feels a chill run down his spine and there’s a tiny part of him that wants to throw his arms around Kacchan and apologize right then and there.

“I hate you too,” Kacchan whispers so softly if he wasn’t so close he never would have heard it.

And just like that a garrisoned wall of steel forms between them.

Izuku practically runs from the car into his mom's arms and they shuffle into their apartment building. He hears the car door slam and the sound of raised voice's, but he doesn't turn to look.

Katsuki is fifteen, staring at the common area of the dorms for his 'mandatory' social time and he still feels like he doesn't have the right words.

Chapter 11: Before & After

Chapter Summary

Can anyone say Downward Spiral via Association Quirk? Basically Katsuki decides to put his whole heart and soul into the 'Fix him' project.

Katsuki knows what the therapist is doing is fucked up, but his options mean he either has to embrace it and stop bitching or he has to give up being a hero. Katsuki never gives up on anything.

Chapter Notes

As some of you guys have already come to realize: The Bracelet is really bad for Katsuki Bakugou specifically. It targets Adrenaline, Stress Endorphins, and noradrenaline.

Obviously, with Katsuki's quirk, he always has Adrenaline hiked up to the highest notch. Something the HPSC and our therapist did not put into consideration.

Which means the shock is solely based on Stress Endorphins and Noradrenaline.

The first is obvious, but some of you might be asking: What the hell is noradrenaline? It's a bit complicated so I'll state it in its most simplistic form for the sake of clarity [Even though it's a little misleading]. Essentially it has to do with heart rate. It is the chemicals in the brain that deals with our fight or flight. As the name suggests, it is a chemical that often works in tandem with Adrenaline, and works to counter low blood pressure, so Katsuki produces more of it than a normal person but not nearly as much as Adrenaline.

So, essentially, whenever Katsuki's heart rate and stress goes up, the ring will shock him.

Katsuki is at his most calm and his happiest when he is sparring and fighting so that won't be an automatic thing for shock. But any situation that has both his heart rate going up & his stress levels high will end in a nasty shock for our boy.

I heavily leaned into Lady Sif's Headcanons for this so if you want

to check out her ridiculous fun Tumblr page, I highly rec it:
<https://intothedarknessigo.tumblr.com/>

Chapter 11: Before & After

He doesn't feel well.

That shit was fucking nuts and there's a part of him that wants to hit the ground running. That wants to pack his bag and get the fuck out of dodge. Away from everyone and everything. Because *that* bullshit... it wasn't right.

It wasn't right.

He knows better than this. She's a manipulative cunt and he *let her* do that shit to him. He let her do the weird 'association' thing and... Katsuki put his head in his hands, breathing in and out with his head bent down touching his knees.

The world is so fucked up. His eyes are tired, and his face feels hot. Like he wants to cry but screw that. Screw that shit. He isn't Deku. Crying doesn't solve a god damn thing. He needed to lay out his options. Needed to think.

The Hero Public Safety Commission was the law enforcement for the heroes. They decided who go their license. They were the top dogs which meant that if he went to Aizawa to bitch about what was happening there was jack shit his teacher could actually do about it. And yeah, Aizawa might be pissed off on Katsuki's behalf but what did it accomplish? Fucking nothing, that's what.

There was a small voice in the back of his head that questioned whether Aizawa knew about it already though and approved. He didn't *think* Aizawa was aware. Why the hell would he recommend he start therapy at UA if he knew Katsuki was already going? Or maybe Aizawa knew but didn't *know* about the methods.

People had to know.

That was the kicker.

People had to know about her 'Association' quirk. They had to know and approve of it. She was fucking certified. Her credentials were legit. Even his own mother had approved when she looked the

therapist up. The Public Hero Safety Commission clearly knew about it. Clearly approved of it.

Was it really so surprising though?

Maybe it was just Katsuki.

Maybe he was just being an overdramatic bitch about it like his mom tended to say.

UA had approved of chaining him up after all. The teachers had muzzled him. Chained him to a podium because he'd said no. Was that so far off from what Dr. Kobayashi was doing? She was mild compared to that, really.

All those adults in the stand...

His teachers.

The Media.

They thought Katsuki deserved it.

If he went to Nezu, would the principle do anything to help him?

No one ever helped him in these situations. Hell, most people put their stamp of approval on it. No one had ever asked Katsuki if he was okay. Not after the Sludge Villain or the USJ, not after the Sport's Festival or I-Island, not after Kamino...

Fuck.

He couldn't do this. He wasn't going to throw himself a pity party. God damn it. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Options. What were his fucking options?

Stay. Deal with the 'Association.' Wear the ring. Do the remedial class. Be the hero everyone wanted him to be. It would only be a couple months. A few months of his life.

Tell Aizawa. UA won't fight for Katsuki, they've proven that, but his teacher will. Best case scenario, Aizawa gets pissed and tries to fight the god damn Hero Commission itself on Katsuki's behalf, before losing. Katsuki probably loses his chances at a license. Worst case scenario. Aizawa already knows and approves.

Go home. Drag himself and his shit back to the house with his tail

between his legs. Deal with the fall out with his mom, with his dad, and all the humiliation, contempt and disappointment the both of them would have in spades. Rethink his life and what little possibilities he has left now that the entirety of Japan seems to despise him. Live forever with everyone knowing that he gave up.

Use the card his dad gave him to get the fuck out of Japan and never look back.

...

...

...

...

He hated how fucking appealing that last one was.

What would that make him though?

That would be turning his back on the work. Being a coward and running. That would... Well... He never gives up and he works hard. The two tiny pinpricks Katsuki's been able to find in this mess of positive qualities he has. The only positive things that anyone has ever had to say about him. Any option but the first means giving those two things up.

He needs...

He doesn't *need* anything. But he wants someone in his corner. He *wants* one person to tell him that it's all wrong. He *wants* one person, just one person, to tell him that what happened at the Sport's Festival wasn't right. He *wants* someone to tell him that the letters are wrong, the phone calls are wrong, the people on the streets and online are wrong about him. He *wants* one person to tell him that it isn't his fault that the camp was attacked, that All Might fell, that Kamino ward's citizens died. He *wants* to be told that it isn't his fault that Villains tried to recruit him. He *wants* to be told that he deserves to have a license like the rest of his classmates. He *wants* to be told by one person in his life that he would make a good hero.

Just one person.

He feels like it wouldn't be so god damn hard then to keep going.

But everyone knows it's his fault.

His classmates don't ever say it, but their silence is enough. Their refusal to even bring it up, steadfast in avoiding the topic, is enough to cement how they feel about it. And where his classmates are dead silent, refusing to outwardly condemn him, the other UA extras are deafening. Down every hall and every class. Even 1B students, who were there that night, talk about it purposefully as he passes.

The night he'd been kidnapped, no one in the news talked about Katsuki's safety. No one questioned if the Villains were hurting him. They were questioning Katsuki. Questioning his loyalty, his integrity, his intentions...

Everyone *knew* why he'd been kidnapped.

And worse.

They weren't wrong.

They weren't fucking wrong.

Katsuki could be in denial all he wanted, but at the end of the day everything pointed to Katsuki being the problem. He breathed out and allowed his hands to drop. The tips of his fingers found the box easily enough. It sat right at the edge, making it that much more convenient to throw the letters into at the end of each day.

It was heavy.

Heavier than the last time he'd pulled it out.

New letters sat on top of old ones. He hadn't opened more than a few since they'd moved into the dorms. He thinks of what the woman wanted him to do. Goals to fix himself. To make him into someone others wanted in a hero.

Deku thought he needed to be nicer.

All Might thought he shouldn't be so prideful.

Best Jeanist said to smile and wave.

Kamari thought he should learn some humanity.

And here... here was a handy box of random strangers. And maybe individually they were useless assholes who had nothing better to do

than lash out at a teenager in their spare time, but they'd all been at the Sport's Festival. They'd all seen the stuff with All Might. If there was a reoccurring pattern that coincided with what those closest to him felt then...

Katsuki could hardly argue with that.

He pulled out his highlighters.

It was almost cathartic in a way. And yeah, that's fucked up, Katsuki knows. He's well aware that if he sat down and tried to explain it to another person they wouldn't get it.

But...

These letters have sat here for months. The kid's drawings of him as a monster. The advice pieces and condemnations, the professionals and pros, the civilians, and victims of Kamino have all just sat under his bed and their voices have clawed at one another for his attention and this...

It feels like he's dissecting the letters. Slowly tearing them apart and categorizing them into pretty little mental compartments. It's easier to dismiss a lot of the garbage. The vague insults he knows don't hit anywhere close to home. The impersonal stabs at his character by people who don't know what the fuck they are talking about. The Pro-Heroes who sound so unprofessional Katsuki *can't* take them seriously.

He cuts them away like the extra fat on a piece of meat. These generic ones are carefully flattened out and put in their own vanilla folder labeled 'Not Worth My Time.' Trimming the pile down to the more legitimate letters. The voices of people who had at least taken the time to really consider what his issues were.

Personality Issue. Blue.

Attitude Issue. Yellow.

Hero Behavior. Red.

Suggestions. Green.

Fighting critique. Purple.

Katsuki moved the generic threats and comments to the side in a large pile. The sex offers and drawings- anything that made him remotely uncomfortable, was placed in another slightly smaller pile. They were placed in their own binder that he labeled 'No help,' at the top. He also writes in careful black marker: **Look into individuals to see if they have records. Letters could help put them away.**

He doesn't think these letters by themselves could accomplish anything. Its part of the reason he doesn't want to hand them over. All that giving them to the police would accomplish would be labeling Katsuki as more of a victim than he already is. No one is going to actually do anything about it and people are free to send letters if they want. There's no law, Katsuki has triple checked, against sending someone a letter.

The other letters were set out and he carefully went through them. Highlighting all the relevant remarks. A lot of the letters fell into one or two of the categories that he could easily put in their own piles. Some of them hit three or four of the categories, the page marked with reds and greens and purple across its surface. Those he put in a category all their own.

By the end of his self-created project, he had a list of characteristics people hated him for. A long list. Words that popped up more often than not in the letters concerning him.

When he finished with the letters, Katsuki went to the internet. His name easily pulled a few hundred items on his search bar. He printed out articles, compiled a list of videos saved on his desktop, pulled opinion pieces, and professional pieces from Blogs and News outlets.

It makes him feel a little like Deku and that leaves a bad taste in his mouth. But this is about himself. Not anyone else. This puts him a bit at ease even if it doesn't really make the feeling go away completely.

He put all of the printed articles in their own binder after he highlighted their points. A board taken from the student supply center was erected for him to carefully write out all the negative points across the top. With room to write suggestions on how to tackle them.

He takes the useful binders and puts them up on his shelf above his desk. They sit next to his textbooks. Thick and brimming with letters he'd kept hidden under his bed for what feels like forever now.

This feels like a step in the right direction.

Like he's facing the issues rather than very blatantly ignoring them.

He takes the more professional letters from the files and carefully tacks them up along with the Goals sheet he's going to have to present to the cunt.

Katsuki Bakugou Try your best not to be yourself PROJECT: FIX



Blunt Honesty

- Keep Opinions and Thoughts to yourself
- Short answers
- Don't answer if its an opinion.
- Shrug.
- If you can't say something nice then don't say anything at all.

Aggressive

- Don't Smile
- [Your Smile scares people.]**
- If you need to spark off then leave the room. Don't do it around other people.
- Don't use sparking off to make points.
- Avoid Eye contact.
- Be gentle
- Try not to break shit.**

Anti Social

- Unfriendly
- Not Good with People**
- Schoolwork out in living room.
- Don't freak when people get close
- Agree if asked to hang out.
- [Unless its Deku]**

Causes Trouble for Others

- Keep fucking mouth shut
- Go along with things as much as possible.
- [Don't fucking argue.]**
- Don't make declarations.
- Don't disagree

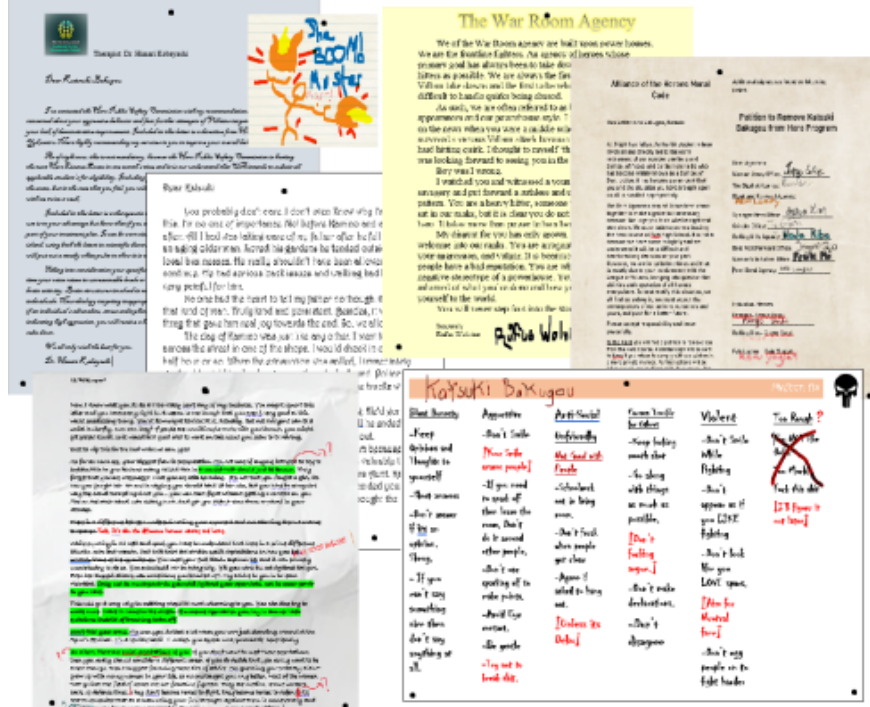
Violent

- Don't Smile While Fighting
- Don't appear as if you LIKE fighting
- Don't look like you LOVE spars.
- [Aim for Neutral face.]**
- Don't egg people on to fight harder

Too Rough ?

- ~~**[Don't Hit Back]**~~
- ~~**[Too Much]**~~
- ~~**[I'll figure it out later]**~~

The board sits right above his laptop against the wall directly over his desk. Easy for him to refer to when he needs reminders of *why the fuck he's doing this*. It's almost time to head to the common area though. Much to Katsuk's chagrin. He gathers his homework into his bag and slings it over his shoulder.



It's time to face the badly played music.

It takes Deku all of two days to realize Katsuki has to be in the common room at certain times now. He sees the familiar scrunch of confusion across Deku's freckled nose and green eyes that are too wide as they watch him. The way Deku hums as his friends talk, not quite paying attention, his eyes sliding over to Katsuki in curiosity that first day and then bewilderment the second and then suspicion by the evening after he leaves. By the third day, he's all but worked out what's going on, and Katsuki sort of hates him for that.

The way the little stalker notices Aizawa walk into the room both days and follows his gaze to Katsuki's spot in the corner. He can practically see the way the other's gears turn and the click that seems to slide into place as Katsuki packs up his homework on the second day at the end of his time. He sees the connection as those stupidly big eyes widen even further and then Deku proceeds to trip over an ottoman and faceplant on the floor because he's not fucking paying attention to where his feet are going.

He tries to sit near Katsuki on the third day.

His eyes shoot up to meet his and there's a silent conversation that travels the air between them in the span of a few tense moments.

'Please?' the eyes say.

'No.'

Shoulder's slump and the shitty nerd's eyes look downcast. Like Katsuki was passing by a god damn puppy and decided to slam his boot into the soft underbelly for fucking fun. He mentally twitched in annoyance. He wasn't doing anything wrong. He just didn't fucking want Deku up his ass.

The shitty nerd takes a breath and his shoulders, they don't relax, but they do straighten and Katsuki feels alarm run through him at the determined look that enters Deku's eyes because no. Fucking no. Deku raises his head to look him right in the eye.

'I'm going to...' the look says.

The metal pen Katsuki's using snaps in two.

Ink stains his fingers and falls onto the three pages of art history laid out before him. An ugly sneer covers his face as he tries to salvage the work.

But it's mostly ruined now.

Katsuki slowly looks up to the pale face of Deku staring down at the table ink now covers. The nerd swallows hard. His Adam's apple visibly moving as those green eyes stare blankly at Katsuki. There's a downturn to his mouth, an indignant almost petulant look on his face-like he wants to point out that what just happened *wasn't* his fault.

Technically.

But the look Katsuki gives him is one that is familiar and warning:

'I will yeet your ass out of the fucking window if you so much as fucking look in this direction again.'

Deku tilts his head, half-turned away from him, but not fully. One eye is centered on him now. The gaze piercing.

'We're going to have to talk sooner or later,' the stare says.

Katsuki's own aggravated stare is accompanied by scratching his cheek with his middle finger. Very slowly. Very deliberately.

Deku sighs.

As far as their classmates are concerned- no conversation took place at all as the green-haired Hero Complex trudged away after a few moments of silence.

YaoMomo and Tsuyu notice next, sometime on the fourth day. Ponytail actually looks like she feels sort of sorry for him which pisses him off. He glowers at both of them because even if his shit hearing can't tell him what they're saying, their awful attempts at being stealthy are embarrassing and neither of them should ever bother to try Underground hero work. Ponytail at least has the fucking decency to look away when she's caught. Froppy just raises her eyebrows at him and tilts her head.

'The better to judge you, my dear,' rings through his head like a fairy tale voice over and he really doesn't fucking appreciate that.

Their judgment is as far as that shit goes, thankfully. They don't bother him or approach him. Though they do offer him a Mexican hot cocoa on the fifth day that he accepts with no small amount of skepticism. They warmed the milk but forgot to remove the skin, so small chunks float, intermingling with pockets of powder from lack of stirring.

He'd be annoyed if he didn't expect this kind of shoddy cocoa making from the extras. It was a nice gesture though, so he doesn't bitch. Instead, he sneaks into the kitchen and fixes it. Adding a touch of espresso and whisking some heavy cream into a light foam. A dab of powdered sugar to sweeten it, but not enough to turn the foam into a buttercream. After warming it up a bit, he spoons it into the cocoa, mixing lightly. He sips, far more pleased by the smooth taste, the sweetness offset by the coffee and Mexican spice.

He doesn't get why people half-ass shit.

If you're going to go through the trouble of making food or beverages in the first place, isn't it better to go the extra couple of steps to make

it worth the effort?

People don't like it when he says things like that so he keeps the thoughts to himself. He's already been shocked way too many fucking times this week and the 'association' with *curse* words is one step away from making him a flinching mess.

Cocoa has to be the simplest recipe in the world and yet nobody gets it right. At least YaoMomo and Tsuyu aren't animals though. They didn't make it with water. He'd have lost his god damn mind on them if he found out they were using fucking hot water in their hot cocoa. Some people had no decency or sense.

Speaking of people with no decency or sense...

It takes the squad seven god damn days to connect the dots. The lot of them have the situational awareness of five-year-olds and he's honestly worried it's going to get them killed one day. Not that he'd ever say that out loud but it definitely means the losers are going to be doing training exercises in battle awareness until their feet bleed.

They're pleasantly surprised by his presence at first. It takes them way too long to get suspicious about his sudden time spent in the common area. By time Sero asks if he's being forced to socialize, Ururaka-whose walking by, snorts into her drink and that pretty much confirms that his idiots are the last in the class to know.

"Are you being punished for something, Kacchan?" Kaminari crows, slinking into the seat across from him and grinning like a cat with his teeth around the neck of a bird. Sero jabs Kaminari with his overly large elbows.

"We think it's good that you're socializing," Sero insists, sending a heated glare Spark's way. "And we know you like your schedules..."

"Way too much," Kaminari mutters under his breath.

"But you don't really look like you're enjoying yourself when you come out here," Sero said slowly. He was choosing his words carefully and Katsuki realizes it was probably because the last conversation they'd really had ended in a confrontation in the kitchen. "And we were thinking maybe we could set up a Mario Party out here. It could be fun? Give you something to do while your down here other than work."

"I'm going for a run after this," Katsuki told him, only a little

regretfully.

“It won’t hurt you to take a few hours off,” Sero wheedled. “You’re looking pretty roughed up by the remedial lessons from yesterday, no need to overwork your muscles. It could set you back to over train. You already go pretty extreme and the remedial classes are on top of everything else you’re doing.”

Sero didn’t get it.

Katsuki had failed. At every turn, he’d failed. Yeah, overworking himself and overtraining would set him back. That’s why he had his schedule. Each session he did worked on different muscles in his body. Different skills. Muscle mass wasn’t the end game. Dexterity. Flexibility. Shoulder strength to handle the backlash of his explosions. Endurance training. Sure, Katsuki did do a lot, but there were so many different categories that he never overdid any one of them.

When his body was thoroughly taxed (but not overly so), he switched it up to academics. School. Hero work. Chemistry and Engineering for his specific quirk. The more he learned about each topic, the more he was forced to recognize just how little he did know. He could dedicate a lifetime to studying just one subject and still not know everything. There was never *not* something to study.

And it was easy to set up a schedule around that so that he was never overwhelmed by one side of the chasm or another. Flexibility Training. A session on strategies used in protecting protesters from violent ambush tactics. Endurance Training. A session on the mathematical equations needed for designing the proportions of his gauntlets based on his own expected muscle growth so that the metal doesn’t cut off his blood circulation. Quirk experimentation for more advanced maneuvering.

It was a constant rotation utilizing all the different skills Katsuki needed to be a hero. Maximizing his time and energy to the best of his ability without overtaxing him or burning him out. He made sure to sprinkle in personal time for himself here and there.

His music, for one, was a big personal time for him. A time to decompress, to feel the wind rustling his clothes and to remind him he was free and could linger outside as much as he wanted. The feel of the sun against his skin and the pleasant hum of a soothing voice after a long day of training. Other people might see it as another form of training and in a way, he supposes that it is part of his endurance

training, but it was more of his cool down. His leisure time to think about whatever he wanted and to drift off.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Katsuki told both of his friends.

Kaminari, ignoring the fact that Katsuki was sitting in an armchair and not one of the couches, forced himself into the seat beside him. Katsuki tensed as their bodies touched along every surface; legs, waist, sides, arms. Suppressing the bodily flinch, he glared at the other.

“What the ever living fu- ”

“You need love,” Kaminari said playfully, cutting off Katsuki's almost curse and head falling dramatically on his shoulder. Katsuki cringed away from the words and him, leaping from the chair and snarling. He looked over at the clock but there was still ten minutes before he was allowed to leave. Kaminari spread his arms outwards, a pout on his face. “Come oooooooooon, Kaaaaachaaaaaan, let us love you!”

“Thought you said I was unlovable,” Katsuki snapped without thinking.

Sero's head swiveled around to stare at Kaminari.

“What?”

Kaminari looked confused, eyes wide.

“When did I ever say...” a light clicked behind the blonde's eyes. “Bakugou... Blasty... that wasn't... it was just a joke.”

“Oh Kami,” Sero sighed, sounding disappointed.

Kaminari wrung his hands, looking anxious.

Katsuki ignored them both, packing his bag. If he couldn't get his homework done then he'd make dinner. He still had some reasoned rice in the refrigerator from yesterday and a pork loin he had marinating. All he really had to do was preheat the oven and shove it in at this point.

“Bakugou, you didn't really take that seriously, did you?” Kaminari asked, sounding pained.

“I don't take anything you say seriously,” Katsuki snapped.

He jerked as the ring shocked him.

Fuck.

“Hey, hey,” Sero called, looking startled. “We should talk about this, yeah? Clearly, some stuff’s been misunderstood. You know Kami. You *know* him. You know he didn’t mean it like that.”

“I just said I don’t...”

“Yeah, no, I think you took it to heart,” Sero said quietly, his eyes were darting around the room, looking to see who else was around. There were a few, but no one was paying attention to them. “Listen, I know you don’t like talking emotions and stuff, no! Don’t go. Shit. Bakugou, just stay for a second!”

Katsuki flinched again as another shock went through him.

Every part of him was buzzing with anxiety and stress.

This wasn’t how the ring was supposed to work. It was only supposed to shock him when he lost his temper. It wasn’t supposed to do it just because he was fucking anxious! Shite.

“Why don’t we meet in my room?” Sero whispered. “Away from everybody. We can talk things out. This doesn’t have to be a big deal. We can just... clear stuff up.”

“I don’t need anything cleared up,” Katsuki muttered. “I’m going to go make dinner.”

He made to force his way past, but Sero only stepped more in front of him.

“Are you afraid to talk to us?” Sero asked in a challenging voice.

“Fffuuu...nnnnmmmm,” Katsuki grit his teeth, keeping the curse word tapped down. Breathing carefully. “It’s not a big deal. Don’t. Make. It. One.”

“If you believe what he said then hell yes that’s a big deal,” Sero said, folding his arms and leaning in to whisper. “No one thinks your unlovable.”

“Shut up,” Katsuki hissed.

Because there were a fuck ton of people who absolutely did.

Katsuki was 80% sure his own mother thought it.

“Get out of my way.”

“I know you don’t want to have this conversation out here, but I will if you make me,” Sero hissed. “Let’s go up to my room.”

The ring shocked him again.

God damn motherfucking sanctioned piece of shit. Fuck every Hero Public Safety Commission Asshole with a rusted screw through every one of their fucking holes... and then dig salt and sand into the wounds. Hard.

“I don’t need whatever bullshit...”

Katsuki felt the shift as he was hit by the ‘association.’ An image slammed into like a truck. YaoMomo stood in front of him. His legs were tangled in a painful set of metal wiring. Shame and self-loathing sunk into his skin and Katsuki paused as he tried to recover his bearings.

He wasn’t there.

He hadn’t lost.

He hadn’t even fought YaoMomo.

Todoroki had beaten her at the beginning of the tournament.

It wasn’t real.

“Bakugou...?” Sero called out.

He clutched at his bag, trying to will the feelings not his own to go away. To blink away the image seared into his head. He didn’t want to deal with anyone right now. He just wanted to get away.

“I said move,” Katsuki muttered, all the anger and anxiety drained from him to be replaced by bone-deep exhaustion. Sero searched him, slowing moving to the side. He could see Kaminari out of the corner of his eye. Standing back and looking lost.

Katsuki made his way to the kitchen, not making a sound as he put his food into the oven and prepped everything. Not saying a word to anyone even when Kirishima popped in and tried to pry a conversation from him.

He shrugged the redhead off as he made up his plate, taking his food

upstairs with him and avoiding everyone in the room. Especially Ponytail. The image of wires and shame and self-loathing still fresh, like lemon juice, poured over a palm filled with papercuts.

Katsuki is a light sleeper.

Any noise, any footstep, any creak of a door or thunder of boots or the distant sound of voices had his eyes cracking open and a sense of urgency running through him. He'd oftentimes find himself flipping out of bed and looking around, knowing he had to do something but finding nothing that he needed to do in front of him. His heart would race and his hands would shake and he'd end up getting dressed whether he'd slept for two hours or eight.

He'd walk out of his room and into the dorms, seeking out what had woken him. Even when he found it though... the girls getting together in one room, idiots cooking at 'fuck you' time in the morning, Kirishima and his damn punching bag. Whatever the hell it was, even after Katsuki found it, it never alleviated the feeling in his chest.

Rapid-fire palpitations of his heart like being in a battle but it lacked all the excitement and the clear-headedness Katsuki normally felt. It was more groggy as he woke up fully, more... more fear-based. And now accompanied by a small sharp jolt as he woke up with the heightened stress of a buffalo realized too late that he'd been herded over a cliff.

Which was fucking stupid.

Baseless.

There was no reason for why he was acting so paranoid and weird. There's no reason why he jerks awake at the smallest sound, listening for movements around him, noise of any kind, why he feels like he needs to be up and doing *something* or else...

Fucking what?

Why?

It makes no fucking sense.

Worse yet. Getting up and walking around, investigating every noise that creaked in the night and feeling like he was expected to do something had the unfortunate affect of making him look like a god damn weirdo. Just wandering with no rhyme or reason, watching people like a second coming of the Grim Reaper.

He knew his eyes looked glazed over.

He knew that.

He was dead on his feet, tired out of his mind, and often times didn't know what he was doing when he got up. He just knew that he needed to be doing something.

9:00.

12:00.

2:00.

5:00.

At all hours of the day, he'd find himself bursting out of his room with the feeling that he needed to be doing something. He'd scared a number of his classmates with this. Marching into the common area as if there was something wrong. Only to walk calmly into the kitchen and make himself tea, much to the frightened, half risen student's confusion.

Wide eyes watching him too carefully, not quite sitting, as if waiting for a bomb to go off or someone to start screaming. Only no one ever does. It takes long minutes for them to fully sit again and the eyes never leave him.

He's never drunk so much tea in his life.

But it was better than admitting to them that he had no idea why he was down in the common room. Admitting that he wasn't sure there had even been a nightmare. That he'd just popped up out of bed like a deranged daisy for no fucking reason and had sprinted down the hall. Taken the stairs. Burst into the common area at who the fuck knows hour...

For absolutely no reason at all.

Hagakure had asked him what was wrong one night.

“What are you talking about? Nothing's wrong,” he'd replied, playing dumb.

“But you...”

“I what?”

She'd stared at him, glancing at the door before turning back to her movie uncertainly.

Another time Koda had leaped from his spot at the kitchen table, his bunny jumping off his lap and sprinted off towards the living room area. His head has rotated around, looking through windows and towards the doors, turning his back on Katsuki as he turned his whole body around looking for the ‘attack’ that was surely underway.

“What the fuck...” Katsuki stopped where he stood as an image of Iida swinging a leg out towards him hit him. Shame and humiliation striking him like a stab to the heart. He was getting better at handling it and watching his words, but he felt disorientated. He'd slipped. Katsuki breathed deeply. “What are you doing?”

Koda gestured wildly, his hands and fingers moving as he signed to him.

‘What’s going on? Why are you running?’

“To get to places faster?” Katsuki drawled, trying to calm his racing heart.

Koda stared at him for a long moment, frowning at him. Then his hands moved. He made a sign with his right hand, the two middle fingers pointed pointing downwards and touching his thumb, two outer fingers outstretched like bull horns. The hand arched down before he brought his other arm up to touch the first, his other hand spreading outwards, all five fingers wiggling.

‘Bullshit.’

Katsuki coughed in surprise.

He glared, putting his fingers under his chin and quickly pulling them forward.

‘Fuck you.’

Katsuki made his tea, putting in a generous amount of honey tonight

and steadfastly ignoring the other signs Koda made at him.

“You should tell Aizawa,” the impossibly quiet voice spoke.

Katsuki’s shoulders hunched as he picked up the pace.

The next person Katsuki gave a near heart attack to was Icyhot. His textbook was dropped and his left side already had ice particles forming as Katsuki slowed himself down as he entered the common area, looking around him in confusion.

It took him longer this time to place where he was.

“Bakugou?” Todoroki edged towards him. “What’s wrong?”

Katsuki felt a shock but ignored it. The pounding in his ears and heart feeling like they were drowning everything out. He needed too... go somewhere. Do something. He needed... something touched his arm.

Katsuki leaped backward, his eyes trying to focus, find the threat. He needed to get out. That’s what he needed to do. The back of his legs hit something soft. He whirled. Stopped. It was the couches in the common area. He blinked.

Right.

Tea.

He should make tea.

Focus his hands while his mind tried to catch up.

There was no danger. He didn’t need to do anything or go anywhere. He just needed to make tea. Katsuki stumbled towards the kitchen, opening the cabinet and finding his familiar brand of black tea. He didn’t really want that though. He spotted YaoMomo’s teas a few shelves below. She wouldn’t mind if he made some. His fingers wouldn’t quite work with him. Hitting the box first before they managed to grasp hold of it.

“What are you doing?” A voice called.

Katsuki looked over his shoulder.

Right.

Icyhot.

Words sat trapped in his throat. Katsuki clutched at the box of tea and moved to grab the kettle. Fill it with water. He couldn't... He turned on the stove, setting the water down and feeling inexplicably calmer. Like he's accomplished something much grander than boiling fucking water.

He kept the box clutched in his hand as he sat down, eyes glued on the pink floral box with white roses and lavender on the front. Reading the silly side description that claimed one cup a day could cure stress. Fucking ridiculous.

A body sat in the chair across from him.

"Can you hear me?" Icyhot asked.

"Wish I couldn't," Katsuki mumbled, trying his best not to let his body rock forward like it wanted to. He clenched his muscles to stop any movement, wrapped his ankles around the legs of the chair beneath to keep them from tapping.

"I'm not sure what that was about, but it doesn't seem good to me," Todoroki said bluntly. "What panicked you?"

Katsuki breathed through his nose.

"Did you ever think that maybe I just don't want to deal with you?" Katsuki said tiredly, trying to derail the Todoroki Conspiracy Train before it took off.

"I don't think you even knew it was me," Todoroki countered.

"Of course, I knew," Katsuki hissed.

The mismatched eyes gazed into his soul in the way only someone as socially awkward as Todoroki could. Unflinching. Not even knowing that he was supposed to be uncomfortable by long unblinking stares.

They sat in uncomfortable silence until the whistle began to blow. Katsuki unwound his legs and got up to take the water off the heat. He paused as he pulled down a teacup.

"Do you want some?" Katsuki asked.

"Sure."

Steam rose as he brought them over. Icyhot added milk to his, ruining the perfectly good tea instantly. Katsuki grimaced at him, adding his

touch of honey and enjoying the way the hot liquid burned on the way down. Leave it to the candy cane to not even know how to treat tea properly.

YaoMomo would be horrified by his choices.

“What do you think they’ll have us doing for the Remedial courses this week?” Icyhot asked.

“How the hell should- ”

Kaminari has his hand directly over Katsuki’s face. Guilt rose in waves, consuming him as he looked up at the burns covering the electric user, blood gushing from a deep cut on his cheek. But Kaminari still won despite how brutal Katsuki had been.

“...ugou! ... let go!”

Cold.

Katsuki tried to touch his head, to shake the feeling away, but hands were holding tight to his. He tugged harder, trying to stand. Why was he so cold?

Why had he hurt Sparks?

He hadn’t.

He hadn’t hurt Sparks.

Katsuki tugged harder, feeling panic rise.

“You burned your hands! Hold still!”

He burned his hands? Katsuki tried to pull away from Kaminari. The hand wasn’t on his face anymore. It was holding his hands down. He tried to look around the stadium, but the sun was gone. It was darker than it should be.

“Let go, Pikachu,” Katsuki demanded.

“Pika...Kaminari? Bakugou, do you know where you are? I’m Shoto. I’m... its Icyhot.”

Katsuki blinked hard, the kitchen coming back into focus. He stared in confusion at his hands covered in a healthy layer of frost. Red spread across them and a tingling, burning sensation along his palms.

“You spilled your tea,” Icyhot said evenly.

His eyes were wide though and he was looking in the direction of Aizawa’s living quarters.

“Don’t,” Katsuki told him. “It’s just spilled tea. Calm your tits.”

“I’m not qualified to deal with this,” Todoroki deadpanned.

“No shi...” Katsuki bit his thumb, feeling the thin layer of frost on the roof of his mouth as he internally cursed everything in existence. “No kidding.” He corrected. “I don’t need the guy with daddy issues judging me on a slip-up.”

Todoroki looked at him sharply.

“You ain’t subtle,” Katsuki grouched. “Maybe next time don’t have your gross heartfelt speech in a public hallway.”

“Fair enough. I’ve never hurt myself with my ‘issues’ though,” Todoroki said.

“Pfft. What do you call refusing to use your flames and letting your body go into near hypothermia then? Loving yourself? Don’t come at me with your half-baked holier than thou garbage.”

Todoroki frowned.

“I don’t think that correlates as well as you seem to think it does.”

“I don’t get involved in your issues. Don’t force yourself into mine.”

“Sometimes we all need a bit of help, Midoriya...”

“Nope. Don’t want to hear it.”

“At the Sport’s Festival he...”

“Don’t care.”

“But...”

“I’m going to bed.”

“You should at least allow me to treat your hands while your down here.”

“I can do it myself in my room.”

“I would feel better if you’d let me do it.”

“Good thing I don’t care about what makes you feel better.”

“I’ll tell Aizawa if you don’t let me.”

Katsuki paused at that, quirking a brow.

“You could, but then after my session, you’d have to sit down for your own because I can pretty much promise you that I know more than your comfortable with Aizawa knowing.”

Todoroki made a noise of frustration deep in his throat.

“It’s not the same,” Icyhot glowered at him. “You know its not the same.”

“Then you won’t have any issue talking about your feelings on the matter with Aizawa,” Katsuki said casually, knowing he had the candy cane motherfucker by the balls.

“Okay.”

Katsuki’s head turned at a 190-degree angle. The creak of his neck popping loud in the early morning silence.

“What?”

“I said okay. If it means you’re taken care of then I’ll talk to Aizawa.”

God fucking damn it.

Stupid fucking hero complex goody too shoes motherfucker.

Katsuki sat down at the table, putting both his hands on top of it. Todoroki hummed in his throat, a pleased sound that made Katsuki want to bang his head against the wooden surface hard enough to knock him out.

Icyhot was obnoxiously gentle about it. Spreading Aloe on the water burns and his palm. There were no blisters, a nifty side effect of Katsuki’s quirk. Honestly, the tea had barely affected him at all. This didn’t seem to matter to the other. He wrapped Katsuki’s hands as if they were third-degree birds instead of the mild not even qualified to be first-degree that they were.

“Do you feel better?” Katsuki asked snidely.

“Yes.”

Katsuki rolled his eyes as he stood from the table, cleaning up the tea and gingerly washing the two teacups he'd neglectful before.

“You're not alone, you know,” Todoroki told him as he made to leave.

“Get that from a fortune cookie,” Katsuki snapped, already way past done with this conversation.

“No. It's just something I've learned along the way. I'm surprised you haven't yet, considering everything.”

Katsuki rubbed his thumb along the bandages stretched across his palms as he listens to Todoroki's feet pad out of the kitchen.

Katsuki wasn't such a mess naturally.

The ‘Association’ was just hard to deal with.

He just needed to suck it up and deal for a few months and then he'd never have to see the therapist again. He'd pass the remedial exam. Get the ring off. Things would go back to how they were before.

The thought wasn't nearly as comforting as it should have been.

Before hadn't been that great either.

Before is what brought the now into existence.

Katsuki, the person who brought Villains down upon the camp, whose rescue caused the deaths at Kamino, the forced retirement of All Might. The UA student who needed to be chained at the Sport's Festival. The one who the entire campus blamed for having to move into the dorms.

No.

Before wasn't where Katsuki wanted to go back to.

Even if it was awful, he had to move forward.

Katsuki wonders what would happen if he laid it all out to the squad and Aizawa. If he admits to having known about the attack on the camp. If he shows them the letters and tells them the real reason he

didn't have a phone when they first moved in. If he told them about why he doesn't want to leave campus and face the general public.

Everyone knows its his fault for All Might.

Everyone *knows*.

All the voices screaming at Katsuki that he's guilty. That he deserves all the awful things that are happening.

And all Katsuki can see is that moment at the Sport's Festival.

When he was chained to the podium for the world to see and no one helped him. His classmates were standing beside him. Todoroki and Tokoyami both and they did nothing. They saw that as something Katsuki deserved. To be muzzled. Silenced because he said no.

All he can see is his classmates, Kirishima and Deku and the others, standing as a group and looking on in embarrassment for being associated with Katsuki. His teachers who either were part of the act or condoned it.

It all started there.

If Katsuki told them and they reacted in the same way they did at the Sport's Festival, he's not sure if he could take it. If they became aware and they were humiliated to be seen in public with him like they had that day... if they treated him like he deserved it...

Katsuki's shoulders hunch.

All he can think about is how if it had been anyone else up there, chained like that, his classmates would have done something. All Might would have done something. But it was Katsuki up there. So it was okay.

It wouldn't have been okay for anyone else.

He won't delude himself into thinking his classmates care about him. Not in the way they care about each other. They've proven that. His classmates have a hero complex and sometimes he benefits from that, but it has more to do with what they want to be than any type of relationship they have with him.

Except...

Kirishima and Sero and Kaminari and Ashido... he doesn't get what's

wrong with them that their so set on being his friend. But he knows if any of them ever look at him like they did at the Sport's Festival- like his very existence is horrifying, he's not entirely sure he'd survive that sinking ship.

Katsuki doesn't trust his classmates.

But he trusts his squad.

He thinks they've changed their minds about him since the Sport's Festival. He *hopes* they don't think of him in the same way they looked at him that day.

He doesn't trust his teachers.

But he trusts Aizawa.

The man had been severely hurt during the events of the Sport's Festival and he's done nothing but prove to Katsuki he believes in him.

He hates himself for it, but Katsuki cares what they think. He cares so fucking much even though he's fought so hard not to. He wants to prove that he can do this. He wants to prove that he does have humanity, that he deserves to be a hero, to be here among all the others.

And right now he knows he doesn't.

All he's done is fail.

Over and over and over and over again.

Unlike Todoroki this isn't his first stumble. Remedial isn't about getting a license. It's not about taking extra classes to 'catch up' as the Candy Cane keeps repeating like a broken fucking record. It's about proving he deserves to exist, that he's a person, a hero.

And he has to prove that to everyone.

The Hero Public Safety Commission.

The therapist.

The General Public.

UA teachers and staff.

UA students.

To Himself.

Katsuki can't afford to bitch and whine about a hole he dug himself. He can't afford to make excuses and he sure as fuck can't afford to let his own issues get in the way of succeeding. So what if he's not comfortable. So what if all of this scares him a bit. So what if its hard. Katsuki might not be alone but since when has being with people ever helped him?

Katsuki's been surrounded by people for as long as he could remember.

His dad never helped him against his mom.

The heroes didn't help him against the Sludge Villain.

His classmates didn't help him at the Sport's Festival.

No one helped him when the letters started coming or the phone calls or harassment on the streets.

Katsuki was left alone with Villains for days and no one asked if he was okay afterward.

Katsuki doesn't want to go back to Before, he's not so sure he can handle the After, but one thing is absolutely certain: everyone is watching him. The pressure of that knowledge is either going to crush him into dust or force him to become something else entirely.

Even if Katsuki was willing to voice any of these things out loud, he'd probably fuck it up. The words would come out wrong, like they always do, its better to keep it all locked up where no one else can be hurt by it.

Where Katsuki can't hurt anyone with it.

He'll keep it wrapped up inside his chest until he's made it to the After. When he's deemed 'fixed' and worthy of what everyone else seems to have naturally. No one needs to know that he struggled to get there.

Ch 12: Try Your Best Not to Be Yourself

Chapter Summary

Katsuki takes a step in fixing himself.

Mirio shows up to fight Class 1A as a demonstration.

Dadzawa.

Class 1A begins to push back against Katsuki's 'fixing'

Anisanialek made another Beautiful piece of art for this story!

<https://www.instagram.com/anisanialek/>

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Try Your Best Not to Be Yourself

It had been a long time since Katsuki bothered to think his parents would say something nice when he hands them the roll of A's down his report card. At first, he prepares himself for it. Not praise. Not that. No. Katsuki keeps himself as still as possible as finely manicured hands break the seal and flip open the papers. Barely a glance at the grades. She reads the teacher's note with a frown that turns into pressed lips and narrowing of the eyes.

Katsuki is a good student.

He doesn't get along well with his classmates ever, but he doesn't fuck with authority. He listens and he does exactly what they want of him. He cleans the classroom when it's his turn without complaint. He passes out assignments when he's asked.

That always seems to upset her.

It hadn't been a good semester for him though. The school had insisted Katsuki take an extracurricular class for fun. And when he'd tried to ignore them and take an additional math course, they'd stuck him in a pottery class. Only Katsuki's hands kept popping off. Having to mold clay with his bare hands not mixing well with his quirk.

Frustration at being stuck in a ‘useless class.’

He’d gotten a B.

It marred his perfect score and Katsuki had been upset.

But hadn’t thought much of it when he handed his mother his latest report card. He’d thought she would do the same as she always did. Signing it without even glancing at him. Turning away from him with tension in her shoulders and one hand fisted casually at her side while the other sat cocked on her hip.

She didn’t though.

He kept himself rigid as she paused. Her lips twitching and Katsuki felt a pit open up in his chest as it turned into a small, pleased smile and she looked at him.

“So the perfect Katsuki slipped up, huh?”

The board above his desk in the UA dorms comes down easily. The words stand out sharply to him as he examines the goal sheet. He flips it over to the blank side, taking the sharpie out of his mouth. He writes across the top: **Positive Traits Striving For.**

Katsuki has always prided himself on being honest. He tries to not lie, not even when facing the Villains. Not when talking to his parents. Not to Deku. He’s always spoken exactly how he feels and what he thinks.

Even though his words never seem to get the meaning across that he wants them to. People don’t seem to understand what he’s saying. They don’t get him. He doesn’t get them. Even when he tries to put into words exactly what he wants and how he feels, no one ever seems to *understand* them.

But he never tries to be confusing or unclear. It’s against his nature to lie, to sugarcoat things, to not say exactly what the situation looks like to him. Even when it’s not nice or pleasant. To him it’s a betrayal. If a person asks you their opinion and you lie or try to manipulate it in any way then how can anyone trust your word? He doesn’t understand

why people thinks its honorable or good to go around lying to others.

To tell them their art is beautiful when its shit.

To say that their dancing routine is good when it's not.

To tell someone that they don't know *why* the others are making fun of their hair, to say its fine and unique when in reality it's a hot mess on the brink of bursting into flames.

Who does that help?

If everyone is lying all the time about everything than whose opinion can you really trust? It's one thing if they didn't ask for it. Katsuki's not for ruining someone's fun or being an ass to someone when they aren't bothering anyone with their shitty art or dressing up for a good time. But if someone wants to know how he feels about it or they want him to tell them what he thinks? There's this... weird expectation to... to make the person feel good even if it's not what they asked.

Katsuki hates it.

He'd made a promise to himself a long time ago that he would be honest. That he would never lie to someone if they ask his opinion. He won't go out of his way to tell people what he thinks, but if they *ask* he's not gonna fucking lie. All those times his dad told him it would be alright. All those times his dad told him lies and tried to make things seem better than they were. Moving around the elephants in the room like the man had been born to do it.

'She's just upset, Katsuki, she doesn't mean it.'

'The food tastes delicious, don't listen to your mother. You did a great job.'

'We won't be gone long.'

'We'll go out to dinner tonight. Just the two of us. Promise.'

Katsuki refuses to become his dad. To manipulate the truth until there's no trust left. Until when his dad tells him he made curry, Katsuki doesn't think its going to be curry until its sitting on the god damn table. That when his dad tells him that he's going to pick him up from school so they can hang out Katsuki walks home anyways.

If Katsuki says he's going to be at the train station at 3:00 then he will

be stepping onto the platform at 2:45. If Katsuki says he's going to tutor Kirishima or the Squad then every one of those fuckers is passing the test. If Katsuki says he's going to make dinner or do the chores or get the top scores... then by all the power, hard work and talent he possesses he is going to do it. And he is going to do it well.

Only...

People hate that about him.

As he sits in his dorm room with the board in front of him of all the things people hate about him, his blunt honesty is one of the top ones. 'How to be nice' equates to 'how to lie' on his list.

"Look at the person who is approaching you and pick one nice thing to say." Jeanist had told him. "Just one thing."

He fucking failed, of course.

"Your voice isn't too loud or too quiet," Katsuki had begrudgingly told the next person who walked up, who was rounder than she was tall and wore garishly ugly clothes that made her look more like a child's painted ball than a woman.

She'd stared at him with raised eyebrows.

"Your voice isn't annoying," he'd tried to say next. "That's pretty rare."

Best Jeanist's eye had actually twitched as the woman walked away looking insulted.

"You could have just told her that her voice is nice," Jeanist had said when they were alone.

"But it wasn't."

Jeanist had looked at him for a long moment before breathing deeply. It was a lot like those rare moments his parents took him with them to one of their fancy dinner parties or conferences. A look that was both disappointed and yet resigned to deal with it. Katsuki's shoulders hunched up to his ears, glowering at the ground.

"Perhaps we should try something else."

They'd done observation exercises for hours that day. People watching from roofs where Jeanist asked him to tell him what he saw. Video

observations on criminal interviews. Interviews of regular people. It had been painful but better than having to directly interact with them.

Now he felt like he was trying to observe himself.

Katsuki tapped his black sharpie against the board, absentminded drawing an alien on the side of the board with familiar horns. There were other little drawings along its length. A tape dispenser. Lightning bolts. Shark teeth.

What could he do to be less...

His opinions were the problem. His thoughts were the problem. Katsuki never initiated conversation. He only ever gave his opinion when people pulled him in. So what if he just takes it a step further. Gives a textbook answer instead of his opinion. Short answers. Keep his emotions out of it.

Stamp down on his immediate response. Take a second to answer. Give the shortest answer possible and don't let his opinions stain it.

“Don't ruin the trip for everyone else, Katsuki, try your best not to be yourself.”

Try your best not to be yourself.

Katsuki writes that at the center above his rows, as a Title, staring at the words blankly.

Try your best not to be yourself.

Katsuki cracks up. He covers his mouth as the sound comes out, muffling it, but once he's started it's hard to stop.

His mom was right.

“Just... try your best not to be yourself, okay? I want you to have friends. I want you to be someone people will actually like.”

Katsuki underlines the sentence at the top.

- Honesty
 1. Keep opinions and thoughts to yourself
 2. Short textbook answers
 3. Don't answer if it's an opinion if you can. Shrug.

The Blue and Yellow marks sit before him, spread out like a

particularly thorough research paper. Blue for personality flaws. Yellow for attitude flaws. There's plenty that seem to fall into both categories though.

"You all already know how to be fake fucking assholes."

If he'd just kept his mouth shut and his opinion to himself then he wouldn't have gotten into an argument with them. He knows better. He knows cutting off interaction means cutting down harm. That's always been the golden rule.

"And there's a thing called humanity," Kaminari snarled. "I think you're missing it."

Katsuki stares down at the ring. The light blinks up at him, the smooth surface cold against his skin.

His stomach growls, interrupting his thought and reminding him that lunch had been a long time ago. He glances out of the glass door to his balcony, the darkness there telling him that even the sun had dipped out at this point, a moonless cloudy evening already having settled in for the long haul.

That was enough self-reflection for one morning.

The solution was... unsavory but obvious. Katsuki just needed to keep his fucking mouth shut. He didn't have to lie. He didn't have to smile and wave. He just needed to stop being so fucking opinionated when people talked to him.

That was something Katsuki didn't get.

People *sought him out*. They looked for him and pried at him. Good intentions or bad they purposefully confronted Katsuki. It was baffling. He still didn't understand Kirishima. Even now that he could call the redhead his best friend, he didn't get it.

He understood the squad.

That Katsuki had been an out of place outlier Kirishima dragged into their group. They invited him to things and tried to enhance a relationship with Katsuki because he was someone thrust upon them and they'd been given the options of either working with it or causing tension. And like the carefree, kind idiots they were, they'd gone with the former rather than the latter.

Katsuki's relationship with them... the status of friendship he'd somehow managed to garner, was something that had been slowly formed. A wavering bridge Kirishima had forcefully erected between them with Katsuki on one side and the others on the opposite had tentatively reinforced over time.

He knows when it started.

He can track it. Odd as that sounds. They hadn't been on each other's radar before the USJ. Katsuki was just some guy who'd gone nuts on Deku that first exercise. And Kirishima was... Katsuki's not sure. He hadn't paid attention to anyone before the USJ.

"Since when have you been so calm and rational?"

Kirishima's eyes lighting up in surprise. That odd smile like the redhead was intrigued and delighted. The USJ hadn't even been 7 days after the school year started. They hadn't known each other, but before that moment Kirishima had already put him in a box.

After USJ they'd talked a bit. Here and there during the month of training before the Sport's Festival. It hadn't been much though. That had been the crux of it. Working together with Kirishima's full confidence. His insistence that he was the perfect person to work with Katsuki. That they'd win together.

Then asking Katsuki to tutor him after.

That had caught him off guard.

People didn't do stuff like that with him.

Positive Traits Striving For.

Katsuki can be himself around Kirishima, but the rest, even the squad. He needs to strive to be better around them. He needs to be the hero-figure. He needed to learn how to build his own bridges with people.

Force physical closeness.

Keep emotional distance.

Play the person they want him to be. Build the bridge. That's what people wanted. Katsuki doesn't have to cross the bridge. He doesn't have to worry about what the bridge is made of. He just has to build it.

The letters form under his hand on the paper: **Quiet**.

Keep his mouth shut.

Katsuki lifts his palm and carefully draws a **Q** on his wrist. His first legitimate goal. Something to strive for rather than striving to avoid. His throat feels tight as he stares at the letter.

“When will you learn that what you want doesn’t matter!” His mom’s voice shouts in his mind.

‘Guess I finally learned.’

Katsuki pulls his sleeve over the **Q** as he heads to class, trailing behind the squad who wait for him, as always, at the glass doors leading to outside. Mina, leaning against the door to keep it open. Kaminari fidgeting in place, rubbing his thumbs over the strap of his bag and swaying in place. Sero, already outside, texting on his phone. And Kirishima, eyes having been watching the elevator as Katsuki came through, and breaking into a smile at the sight of him.

He finds his steps quickening.

Let’s the hand thread over his shoulders in a half hug as Kirishima tells him about what the squad got up to while he was at the remedial training. Mina walks backwards in front of them all, hands crossed behind her head as she adds in her own commentary. Kaminari’s legs are shorter than theirs, especially Sero’s and he has to do a sort of jog to keep up with their naturally fast stride, but he does so cheerfully.

He lets them talk to their heart's content and makes sure not to ruin it by adding his own thoughts.

It’s a peaceful walk to class.

Class itself turns out to be not so peaceful.

Katsuki lasted longer than any of his classmates against Mirio Togata.

Deku’s little gung hoe speech was as predictable as him leaping into the fray without fucking knowing a god damn thing about the quirk or person they were fighting. As was the nerd’s hesitation as he stopped

to analyze the quirk *after* the fighting was initiated. Their upper classman's cool demeanor as a foot flew *through* his face let Katsuki know the fucker was about to wipe the floor with them.

It reminded him way too much of All For One even in the face of All Might showing up so Katsuki did the only smart move available to him: Phasing required a ground and people to phase through. If his quirk required an attachment to the ground Katsuki had to take to the air.

He let his explosions carry him into the sky of the arena, his classmates barely flinching at the sound. He got high enough to be out of throwing range for anything, watching from above with calculating eyes as each of his classmates were taken down in seconds. Able to move through matter in the breath of a moment.

However... he had to come down eventually to face the clothless wonder and with his classmates scattered unconscious bodies all over the place, there was no way to use his explosions like in a one on one arena battle without endangering them. Not only that... but the bastard's attention was solely focused on Katsuki now rather than the eighteen extras down below. A grin stretching his face and a glint in his eyes Katsuki had no idea how to name.

He shot off a few AP shots though at the corner of the arena to shower the area in smoke. The bastard couldn't grab him if he couldn't see him and before he landed he let loose a Flashbomb to further blind eyes that would be squinting to see in the smoke.

Air moved near his leg.

Katsuki leaped up, hand snatching at a wrist and detonating.

"You are VERY clever," a cheerful voice said directly behind him, a hot breath hitting the back of his neck.

His whole body froze.

'Clever Boy.'

For the briefest of moments red, stringy hair framed a face with big lips and eyes covered by sunglasses even in the darkened room of a seedy bar. Then it shifted and Katsuki was staring too wide at another broad-shouldered individual, big blue eyes staring directly at him, the smile gone.

‘When did he...?’

A fist slammed into his stomach.

He lost his breath, arms twitching as if to clutch at his stomach, but Katsuki used his knees buckling to roll instead, to swing his leg out to sweep the other’s legs out from under him. His own leg phased through both though.

He detonated, his hands forcing his body into a standing position even as the Mirio in front of him doubled in his vision and his legs threatened to buckle. His left leg went back to balance himself but Mirio was gone and before he could react there was a grip on that back ankle, flipping him like a child back onto the ground. Katsuki threw out his arms to catch himself, twisting his ankle in the others iron grip hard enough that there was a distinct CRACK! in the air as his ankle broke. Startled blue eyes were all Katsuki saw, grinning viciously, he used the fall to slam his right foot into the bastard’s face.

But his foot phased through again.

The grip on his ankle dropped and Katsuki twisted to land on his back, sending an explosion outwards to put distance between them. Pain radiated from his stomach and ankle, but he made himself stand, looking around wildly for the enemy.

Only to find Mirio Togata frowning back at him and his classmates staring openly.

“Bakugou,” Aizawa’s voice rang out across the field. He glanced behind him to see his teacher and Half and half standing off to the side. Why the fuck hadn’t the candy cane joined? “While your tenacity is noted, what is your plan here now that you broke your own ankle to get out of a hold?”

Katsuki gasped for breath, looking around first at his classmates, who were similarly trying to regain their own breathing while switching their gaping gaze between him and the Mirio guy.

Fuck.

Fuuuuuuuck.

Aizawa was right. There had been no plan. Just a desperate need to escape. But like hell was he going to admit he was outmatched or that he’d lost track of where he was for a moment. He grinned viciously at

the blonde in front of him, careful to keep the weight off of his left foot as he held his hands out in a defensible manner even as he tried to catch his breath.

He was definitely gonna get his ass handed to him.

The smile came back on the fucker's face as Katsuki met him with his own savage grin.

"You sure?"

Katsuki made a 'come here' motion with his hand.

"You'll have to hit me harder than that to make *me* stay down!"

It felt like seconds between the naked third year slipped through the floor and chop to the back of his neck. He'd expected it though, sending a blast directly behind him even as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

He lost.

AGaIn.

He sticks around only long enough to listen to Mirio Togata's lecture and for Recovery Girl to heal his ankle. It sends a wave of exhaustion through him, but that's good for endurance training. It's not actually his muscles that are strained. Just his stamina.

Deku is positively brimming with reverence for the third year and Katsuki feels the smallest twinge of pity as those too large eyes hyper focus. Analyzing the senior with the same kind of fanaticalness that had left Katsuki uneasy for most of their childhood.

There's a pit of shock that's engulfed him and he knows later he'll be angry with himself for losing so completely. But he's in one of his weird moods again where everything feels a little off kilter. Like he's not quite here.

Katsuki doesn't notice the looks some of his classmate's exchange at his quiet departure nor the tired, quirk worn eyes of a certain teacher. He especially doesn't see the way Mirio Togata leans into said teacher's side and whispers concerns even as he keeps a smile planted on his face.

The rest of classes had been shit.

His mandatory half-hour had been plagued by the squad trying hard to cheer him up when all he wanted to do was get his homework done.

His classmates had tried to get him to have dinner with them.

Aoyama was cooking tonight. Katsuki could tell by how much seasoning was being added to the meat and the unholy amount of cheese that the majority of the dumb asses would be forcing the food passed their lying teeth and reassuring the sparkly twinkle toes how good it was through their gag reflex.

The many, many, many drawbacks to being fake assholes with hero complexes.

“What does our local Chef think of my delectable services tonight, hm?” Twinkles asks as he enters the kitchen.

Katsuki stares blankly, his eyes trailing down to the **Q** on his wrist, before trailing to the Italian seasoning bottle. The lid completely taken off of the seasoning and half the new container gone. The Sea Salt and pepper diminished by 1/5 as well. The French baguette that’s being left out in the air before the meat has even been cooked, which means it will be hard as a rock by time it hits the table. And the cheese.

Nothing being done with it.

Just served as is.

‘Their all going to be shitting themselves and sick to their stomachs tonight.’

Out loud he just shrugs, trying to keep his face as blank as possible. Trying to keep his hands from throwing the meat away altogether and cooking something that won’t be a miserable experience. He forces himself to not put the bread into the bag. To not scrape the seasoning off the meat. To not cut the cheese up into little bites and pair it with the fresh strawberries in the fridge as a nice side. To not yell that Aoyama doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing. To not reach out and grab the other blonde and drag him to the chopping board to teach him a thing or two about real cooking.

It’s almost painful to turn away.

But nobody wants that shit. They want him to keep quiet. To keep his head down and to not be an ass about other people trying to be nice. To keep his opinions to himself.

Try your best not to be yourself, Katsuki.

Don't ruin things for everyone else.

This is what they want. To let each other experiment and try to cook for everyone. To be in each other's company. Being nice even at the price of a bad meal. No one wants Katsuki screaming at them or forcing his ways on them or his opinions out there.

'So why do they keep asking for it?'

Because they feel obligated to include Katsuki. That same hero complex that will have them forcing down Aoyama's food made them try to get Katsuki involved despite how they really feel.

But he doesn't miss the way they grimace when they see him training during heroics.

He doesn't miss the way they wilt when they're paired with him.

Or how they look like they've been handed a death sentence when they have group work in classes.

Katsuki grabs a protein shake, three water bottles and two bananas before heading for the door out in the common area. He hears footsteps following him. Familiar breathing that he's heard all through his childhood. Too close despite all his pushing.

"Kacchan," Deku called after him. "The way you fought against Mirio, it was..."

Katsuki slammed the door on his way out.

Mirio's stupid thousand watt smile sits in his head like a taunt as he pauses on the mat to take a swig of water.

"You are very clever."

“Clever boy.”

He'd fucking froze. And for the briefest of moments, he wasn't in the gym anymore. He was in a bar with a Villain inches from his face. Whispering in his ear about how she knew he was lonely. How she knew he didn't belong.

We See You.

Katsuki puts his head in his hands for a moment.

The mats are blue. Cold. Plush under his feet. The room is bright. It's later afternoon, almost evening. Sunlight filters through windows at the top of the gym area. Shadows in the corner. It's warm, but not overbearingly so. It smells strongly of freshly mown grass inside because people have been tracking into the room all day. It mingles with the older scents. Dust and teenage bio that lingers on every surface.

Katsuki breathes in and out. Centering himself. Grounding himself. There are other techniques, but this one is the only one that seems to work consistently for him. It's the one that keeps him in the here and now better than the others.

He lets his hands fall into his lap. The **Q** stands out on his wrist. Slightly faded. He heaves himself from his sitting position on the mat. His breathing is even now. His mind is clear. There is no Mirio or Magne anywhere to be seen. He moves into the starting position.

Performing multiple flips with bombs to use momentum and oxygen to increase an explosion was hella dangerous but fucking effective as shit. Of course, that meant Katsuki had to be really flexible and experienced when it came to gymnastics. If he landed wrong while using nitroglycerin to increase his speed and height, to make his turns tighter, his back springs wider, then it was goodbye hands... or chunks of his own flesh.

Because of his quirk, his body has evolved to be more durable, but that didn't mean indestructible like Kirishima. And while Katsuki figured his pain tolerance was pretty high, he'd grudgingly admitted that Deku's tolerance was higher and he very much didn't want to test that particular theory at any point.

There was a tiny voice in his head that recognized that his need for flexibility and lean muscles rather than the body building shit fit for Kirishima's quirk meant certain things about the future. Mainly that

fucking Deku was bound to be more of a figure like All Might; a powerhouse of strength and muscles, and- if Katsuki's suspicions were correct and Deku really had gotten his quirk from All Might himself then...

Then Deku would be just as fast as All Might. The shitty nerd wouldn't need flexibility or skills like Katsuki to utilize his quirk. Training, sure, more of a fighting style than he had today, and constant hard work, but... There was no need to take a straight forward quirk like Deku's or All Might's and utilize it creatively... Not like with the Mirio bastard or Best Jeanist or even Katsuki himself.

Deku could just plow through any obstacle.

The thought makes him grit his teeth in frustration. For so long the thing Deku had that Katsuki didn't was the shitty nerd's ability to endear himself onto others. His kindness and his fucking speeches about heroes and hope. Even his scary obsessiveness was seen with fondness by their classmates. Deku's tendency to obsess over All Might and even Katsuki himself was seen as 'passionate' in concerns to the former and 'admirable but odd' when it came to the latter. Now that he had some control the shitty nerd would be known for both having the perfect '*Hero Demeanor*' and as a powerhouse.

Katsuki grabs a handful of chalk, dusting his hands with a fresh coat as he went to the corner of the mat again. He takes only a few breaths before he launches his body into another set. There's something inside of him that stretches like a pleased cat at the feel of his muscles burning and his legs almost wobbly from exertion.

He needs this.

Not in the way that his hyper adrenaline needs to be worked out in order for him to sleep at night. Not in the way his nitro needs to be sparked off in order to stop himself from becoming a living bomb. Not even in the way he needs to become better to prove he belongs here.

No.

He needs this feeling. The tautness of his skin with the burning pain just under the surface. It keeps him aware in a way he hasn't really been for a while. It keeps the slipping under the surface feeling at bay. It distracts his mind from going too far from the rest of him. Keeps him grounded.

Katsuki slips.

He shoots off a small explosion to launch himself away from the mat. Away from landing on his shoulder and crushing it. He twists, getting his feet under him before blowing off two more small shots to soften his landing.

‘So the Perfect Katsuki slipped up, huh?’ the familiar voice of his mother whispers. All the things she’s told him and implied with her comments ringing in his ears. *‘What are you worth if you mess up? No one wants you for your personality. You have this and only this. People only seek you out because they want something from you. Not because they want you.’*

Hot tears join the sweat layering his skin.

He screams into the mat.

Screams until his throat is raw.

Until it feels as if his throat will start to bleed.

Katsuki stumbles to his feet and makes it to his gym bag, plopping down harshly beside it. He takes a long drag of his water bottle and allows his breathing to even out as he lays back and closes his eyes.

He’ll rest for just a few minutes.

Katsuki awoke to a ghastly yellow thing on top of him that smelled rank as fuck. His back and shoulders hurt like a bitch. There was a budding headache splitting his forehead and a light overhead that seemed to be searing itself into his skull.

“You’re awake,” the gravelly voice of his homeroom teacher sounded.

Startled, Bakugou twisted in the yellow thing- Aizawa’s sleeping bag, his mind supplied. Though little fucking help that did to make him understand what the hell was going on. As the bag covering him fell away, Katsuki shivered. It was cold in the gym room. The windows that had supplied so much sunlight and warmth earlier were filled with stars and a dark coldness that seemed to seep into the building.

Most of the lights had been turned off.

But the ones directly above them were still on.

Katsuki blinked as steam wafted to his face. A smell of earl grey hitting his nose as he stared at the mat in confusion.

There was a picnic on his gym mat.

Hot tea served beside a plate of beef and white rice and vegetables. A bowl of hot buns sitting beyond that and another set directly in front of Aizawa who was calmly sipping at his own tea and staring at him as if they were sitting at a dinner table in the common room of the dorms.

“What...?”

“I’m going to skip the lecture,” Aizawa told him casually. “Because I obviously can’t say anything about falling asleep in odd places at odd times. But, just so you know what you will be returning to, both staff and students have spent a number of hours searching for you tonight. All Might and Midoriya were *especially* frantic.”

Fuck.

“As it turns out, you might possibly have the worst luck of anyone I’ve met,” Aizawa continued, stabbing one of the pieces of beef with his chopsticks and popping it into his mouth. “Because you fell asleep in the blind spot of two separate cameras.”

Huh.

Shivering, Katsuki picked up his cup of tea, enjoying the hot glass against his fingers.

“What time...” his voice came out in a rasp.

Right.

He’d been screaming like a fucking psychopath earlier.

“One in the morning,” Aizawa deadpanned. “Your classmates were nervous when you didn’t show up at eight, seeing as you keep to such a strict schedule. They waited an hour and a half before telling me. Then the camera’s kindly informed us you were nowhere to be found. Teachers looked off-campus, students looked on campus.”

Katsuki felt a growing alarm as he listened.

He’d been trying to avoid causing people problems.

Not a manhunt.

“It was a little after eleven that Tokoyami found you sleeping, rather deeply, in here. I thought I’d let you sleep a little longer since more than a few of your classmates informed me that you haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

Tired eyes bore into Katsuki.

There were too many classmates to be suspicious of for him to get angry at that small betrayal. At this point, more than half the class had seen him run into the common room like a lunatic to ‘make tea.’

At least Deku hadn’t found him.

That would have been the worst.

Katsuki took the beef and slathered on a mound of sticky white rice, careful to get it all in his mouth and not drop any. It was, thankfully, not Aoyama’s food. The bite quickly elicited a loud growl from his stomach, his body practically crying out with how hungry he was. Katsuki quickly took a second bite.

“Have you considered what we talked about?” Aizawa asked, draining his tea and pouring more from the thermos.

Katsuki presses his lips together.

“Hound Dog is really good, considering my classes tendency towards trouble, I had a long talk with him. He works with all sorts of people. Has all sorts of different ways of handling different emotional needs. If you need to spar while you talk then he can do that. If you need to write out your thoughts he can work with that. If it takes you a few sessions to say anything at all then that’s fine too. If you need to paint or draw to express your emotions then he can set you up with a means to do that.”

Katsuki hadn’t considered trying any of those things.

“What would make you feel comfortable?” Aizawa asked him.

“I don’t know,” Katuski said honestly. “I’m not good at talking though.”

Aizawa snorted.

“You are good at writing though,” the man points out probingly. “I’m

often shocked by how complex you are able to go in your analysis of your classmates and their quirks.”

Katsuki shrugged, feeling his face heat up at the compliment. The idea of writing in notebooks like Deku makes him feel uncomfortable though.

“Deku’s creepy writing doesn’t seem to help the nerd much.” Katsuki tries to explain his thoughts as best he can. “And I don’t think writing about my classmates would make me feel anything but creepy. And I don’t think I could talk to Hound Dog about... I don’t even know him.”

The teacher stares thoughtfully back at him.

“I’m not saying you have to see him, but I’d like to try some things and maybe, if your comfortable, work up to Hound Dog. Maybe I can get him to come spar with the class. You can see what you think. As for the writing- why not write it like a scene?” Aizawa suggests.

“Like what?” At his rasping voice, he takes another sip of the cooling tea.

“Like your Zombie books. Write an event that happened to you and your feelings as it occurred. You don’t have to show it to anyone. It could just be for you. Make it so it's not up here...” Aizawa pointed to his head.

Katsuki stared down at the Q on his wrist, now almost gone from his constant rubbing.

“And you think that will make me a better hero?” Katsuki asked. “People will see me as a hero?”

Aizawa frowned at him and Katsuki couldn’t help but shrink under that gaze. Waiting for the ax to drop. But rather than an ax, it was a hand, firm on his head.

“I see you as a hero,” Aizawa told him. “And I know for a fact that your classmates look up to you. They see how hard you’re working, and it encourages them to work harder. They see how hard you’re trying, and it makes them want to be better. I know not passing the Exam has shaken you, but don’t let it take you down. I know that what happened at Kamino was... it was bad. And I know you aren’t alright yet and that’s okay. These things take time so don’t force yourself to be at 100% if you feel like being 60% today or even 0%.

You're allowed to take breaks and to have days where you want to be Negative Ultra. You don't have to be perfect at what you do all the time, kid. Part of learning is fucking up."

Katsuki's breath hitched and he aggressively wiped at his eyes as they started to leak. Hot tears slipping through despite how hard he tried to keep them at bay.

"It's okay," Aizawa murmured. "You don't have to hold back."

Katsuki's teacup spilled as he tried one last time to keep the thing in his throat at bay. The sob echoed loud and obnoxious in the empty gym. He hated it. He hated the sound and the burning feeling in his throat and chest.

But he didn't hate the feeling of relief.

Or Aizawa as the man gently pulled his sobbing form into an awkward half hug.

[image]

The day Overhaul showed up to 'negotiate' terms, Magne was otherwise engaged. Her favorite pet project, handed down to her by Shigaraki himself, had come to a bit of a standstill. It wasn't over, certainly not, a mere hiccup in a long road of intriguing hiccups.

The day Twice brought the Mafia Boss to their makeshift home, Magne had found her way to a familiar shop in a familiar area of town. Tomman greeted her as warmly as ever. Embracing her and bringing her further into the shop.

"You should not be so close to so many Hero Agency's Sis. A little caution would do you well," the old man murmured.

"Shush, you," Magne, closed the door behind her. "Do you still have the source material from the still you gave me?"

"No. Quince has it. Told me he went to the police, hoping they'd do something about the harassment the kid's facing, but you know how it

goes..." Tomman shrugged. "They weren't gonna do shit for someone everybody and their mother saw as a Villain in the making and they ain't gonna do shit about no kid who caused All Might's end."

Magne snorted.

"Color me surprised."

"He's determined though, thinks he's gonna get UA itself on his side or sometin' ridiculous like that," Tomman shrugged.

"Oh?"

"Says he has an appointment with the principle soonish."

Magne smiled.

"Think he'll deliver something for me then?"

Tomman eyed her suspiciously.

"I can't go sending the kid something dangerous, Sis, you know damn well anything Quince delivers is gonna be tracked down to me. I can't be shown having associations with you like that. Not when you've gone public like ya have."

"No worries, darling, it won't be anything dangerous. I promise no one will be able to track you. I just need you to do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"Find out exactly when 'soonish' will be."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait guys! I had written a lot of scenes in the future with Magne involved and then realized to my horror that Magne was already DEAD by this time in the story.

So I was like... well fuck.

So at first I tried to just have it as another League Member but it wasn't hitting the right notes. I'd spent time dedicating Magne as the stalker and as the person Katsuki interacts with most so I had to take a good hard look and go... okay. This shit about to go AU on our asses.

Because with the Deku versus Kacchan not happening it was already AU. The stuff taking place is directly affected by these two not sorting their shit out and All Might not telling Katsuki that it was an underlying condition that retired him, not Katsuki causing All Might's fall.

Things should be more on track now that I've figured out how to tackle this particular bump in the road. Lol.

Drunken Rambles and Truthful Tales

Chapter Summary

Best Jeanist, King Orca, and the Detective

Chapter Notes

So I know I said the next chapter would be called Smile, but this chapter fit better here for the timing with everything going on. So I switched the chapters around a bit so that you could know King Orca's mindset BEFORE hand.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

chapter 13: Drunken Rambles and Truthful Tales

Kugo had made the mistake once of wearing a black suit. The smooth silk of the Tux had blended in so well with his own black skin that to many it had appeared as if he'd shown up to the Rookie Hero Gathering in the nude. The Media outlets had a ball with that one. They'd switched from talking about how 'Villainous' the new rookie appeared to articles detailing him as 'more daring than the R-rated hero Midnight.'

That had been the first time he'd heard Tsunagu laugh uncontrollably. The normally well put together man burying his face in a pillow and clutching his fist against the couch in an attempt to reign himself in. Every once in a while, he still got texts from Tsunagu with the picture of him in his black suit (redubbed by the hero community as his 'birthday suit'), the teasing was usually accompanied by a question about his current love life because his best friend could be an ass like that.

Not that anyone knew about Best Jeanist's more relaxed, playful side. The man kept a strict hold on his Media Appearance and controlled every aspect of it in a way that Kugo was envious of. It was to the detriment of his personal life though. Everyone wanted to work with the number four hero, but few wanted to hang out outside of the job. There wasn't much interest in getting to know the 'prude' of the top ten heroes.

If Kugo hadn't gone to school with Tsunagu he fears he might have been the same way. He might have passed Best Jeanist by on the streets and been cordial and polite, of course, but he fears he himself wouldn't have ever offered to go out for a drink or to hero events with the man. He knows what many heroes think, he's heard it, about 'who wants a lecture when they're trying to relax?' or 'who wants the stiff around?' or even 'oh yeah, the control freak, sounds like a grand old time.'

It makes him shudder to think what would have happened to Tsunagu then. It had taken years to get Tsunagu to seek him out when he was lonely. To relax and to allow himself to have fun. Of course, Tsunagu had also been the only one in their class who'd spoken to him with no wariness or fear in school. He'd taken Kugo's own awkward blundering with conversation in stride, prodding the talk along with pointed questions and perfectly steering them back into more topics each time Kugo found himself unable to put words out.

Tsunagu could read a room like it was his quirk to do so.

That's why it had been so amusing when Katsuki Bakugou had interned with the man.

"I have never..." Tsunagu said, shooting back a shot of whiskey, "... never met someone so bad at communicating in my life."

"How so?" Kugo tipped his own drink back in a much more moderate manner, sipping at the beverage as he watched Tsunagu plow through more shots than he'd seen the man drink since their early twenties.

"I told him to give *one* compliment to each person who approached us. One. In the span of an hour, he told the head of Ever More Support that while his gear was the most durable, the programming was shit and caused more harm than good so he should fire his IT developers and hire people who know what they're doing. He told a little girl who wanted to be a hero that she needed to work on her footwork otherwise she'd be hopeless. He told a photographer his pictures were off-center and that he shouldn't focus on trying to take pictures from fun angles and instead focus on what actually works before he tries to be 'inventive.' And THEN he told my favorite dumplings cook down the street that his food was 'not the worst' he's ever had."

Tsunagu shot back another one.

"He was genuinely trying, Kugo," Tsunagu said more into his shot glass than to him. "The kid was putting effort into it. I could tell."

“That’s rough buddy.”

“You could practically...” Tsunagu covered his mouth to hide a hiccup. “The frustration was like this cloud around the kid. He’s self-aware enough to know he sucked at it, but not enough to know why or how he was failing. It’s like... he’s never actually socialized before. He held himself so stiffly the whole time and he... he expected people to move out of his way and most did, but some didn’t and the way the kid...” Tsunagu made a vague gesture outwards. “The way the kid would twist himself and sidestep to avoid being within three feet of people? Like touching other people was just about the *worst thing* he could imagine.”

“Was he as much of a spoiled brat as you thought he would be?” Kugo asked.

The man made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded rather painful. Tsunagu shook his head against the dirty bar and Kugo grimaced, knowing the man would be disgusted later on when he was sober.

“He only brought the bare minimum with him. Kept to himself. Did everything that was asked of him. He worked harder than most of my staff. I mean, granted, his vulgarity was ever present...” Tsunagu hiccupped, swallowing a laugh, “...and managed to be more and more inventive by the day. You’d think a gang of bikers raised the child instead of fashion designers. And then...”

Tsunagu laughed, sounding a touch hysterical.

“After all that... the bitch fit he put up with me doing his hair, the cursing, his atrocious way of speaking to people... he made tea cookies!”

Kugo put down his glass.

“He made what?”

“Little macaroons,” Tsunagu said breathlessly. “Little, brightly colored, delicate, hard to make tea cookies. He made enough for the entire agency on his last night. Didn’t take any credit for it, but god forbid any of my sidekicks enter the kitchen willingly. They were... they were absolutely delicious.”

Kugo stared uncertainly at his friend as some of the alcohol tipped over the side.

Tsunagu shot back another shot.

“Most... baffling child I’ve... that I’ve ever dealt with.”

Kugo quietly stacked the shot glasses as he considered that.

“Odd. How did the rest of the people at your agency react to him?” he asked, well aware that some of Tsunagu’s interns and sidekicks really were prudes to the core. That was normally amusing to Kugo, watching Tsunagu try to reign in the judgmental, anal behavior of heroes who’d spent their school years emulating Best Jeanist. The man saw it as his responsibility to fix the issues his own Public image caused. Kugo had told him time and again that the better idea would be to send them to someone like Miruko, but his friend had been horrified at the idea.

‘She would utterly destroy them. I want to fix the problem not light it on fire and throw it away. Miruko is a brilliant hero, but she doesn’t have the patience this requires.’

Kugo wanted to point out that Tsunagu often didn’t have the patience either.

“I have always taught them to uphold a high moral code and to ensure that EVERY HER...” Tsunagu covered his mouth, looking around the bar in embarrassment at the volume. He lowered his voice, leaning over to Kugo as if whispering would make up for the loudness. “... every hero, whether they are a part of our agency or not, is held to high standards. I warned them I would be taking on a difficult case and that we would have to be more... flexible in our mindsets. They were rigid in their approach and that is on me. Normally I only take on sidekicks and interns who are like minded and I fear that has created a bit of an echo chamber, not only for them, but for myself.”

“It happens to the best of us, but it’s good that you recognize that. It seems Bakugou taught you a thing or two while he was interning with you.”

“He did. I am oddly fond of him. He makes fantastic macaroons.”

Kugo grinned at that, watching his friend slump onto the bar.

“So you’ve mentioned,” Kugo murmured, trying very hard to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Tsunagu nodded with too much enthusiasm.

Kugo patted his friend on the back.

"It also sounds like you need to get to bed. Come on, I'm gonna get you home," Kugo murmured.

"I said some rough things to him that first day," Tsunagu confessed, still talking in that whispery voice. "I thought he was gonna be someone who fought me on everything and I wanted to lay down the law, but... I think I fucked up, Kugo."

"You're a good hero and a good person," Kugo reassured him. "Even if you messed up that doesn't mean it's too late."

"The look on his face while I was talking to him on that first day... I think I proved him right about all the stuff he was saying about people."

"What did he say?"

"He hates people, but he could never stand by and watch them get hurt. He'd do anything to protect them and he wouldn't stop until they were all safe. Such a strange answer."

"What part of that did you prove right?" Kugo asked, confused, but Tsunagu's words were becoming more slurred and less coherent.

"Whatever reason he has to hate people... I think I reaffirmed... reaffirmed? Reaffirmed whatever reason he has in his head to hate them. I don't think I helped."

Kugo made sure Tsunagu got to his apartment alright, putting a bottle of water and some headache medicine beside the bed for in the morning. Whoever this kid was, it had really affected the man, more than any intern he'd had.

Katsuki Bakugou.

He must be quite something.

The next time Bakugou comes up in conversation, it's much more Tsunagu's style, the lack of alcohol making him much more analytical about it all, less emotional. And a lot less talk of cookies.

They're on patrol together, having been warned that a group of Villains might be hitting the Central bank in the area after being tipped off by drug dealer wanting to cut down on his time in prison. So far things have been quiet though and soon enough conversation goes to potential new sidekicks from the class graduating this year.

Kugo doesn't really have an eye on too many, though he is considering taking on the water amphibian quirk user at UA as an intern at some point. He's heard she has a level head. Of course, Froppy, being involved in the same class as Tsunagu's own recent intern has the man complaining about his struggles with his own Sidekicks. Apparently, they've been badmouthing the kid around the agency despite the number four hero's clear disapproval.

"They are allowed to have their own opinions, of course, but I feel as if they failed to utilize their most basic observations skills when faced with Bakugou's vulgarity," Tsunagu sighs.

Kugo grunted as he landed on the building across from the bank, making sure his com was still synced up to the police that had been keeping their distance, not wanting to alert the potential Villains to their presence.

"I'm surprised you feel so defensive of the boy even if you are fond of him," he noted, absently, glancing at his friend. "Is what they are saying really that bad?"

Tsunagu grimaced.

"I hear them whispering... making bets on if he'll turn to villainy. Mocking the boy's attempts at interacting with them while he was at the agency. Making him out to be little more than a wild animal than a person."

"Shit," Kugo murmured. "That's... that's bad."

Suddenly the tension in his friend's body language made sense.

"While his communication was atrocious Bakugou showed a remarkable ability to display hero traits through his actions. His paperwork was meticulous and well thought out. The few petty crimes we took care of had Bakugou acting with remarkable decorum and efficiency. Though he appeared to disagree on a fundamental level with my sidekicks on... everything from approach and attitude to technique, there was no point in their interaction where he went against their decisions. He was disrespectful to a fault but there was

no point where he tried to physically go against my orders or decisions. He did exactly what he was told to do when he was told to do it and tried his hardest at every task even when he was immensely uncomfortable and out of his element.”

“Not the rebellious hellion the Festival made him out to be then,” Kugo said thoughtfully. It was easier to accept his friend’s words for what they were when they weren’t slurring so badly. He also wasn’t sure how much of their drunken conversation Tsunagu remembered before he took the man home. “A good kid just with terrible people skills.”

“The worst people skills,” Tsunagu agreed. “He respected what I had to say, but he didn’t *trust* what I had to say. He took everything with such wariness and skepticism. He has no faith in people at all. The lectures I gave him on technique and skills he paid rapt attention to but the moment I spoke about people skills, garnering good media attention, working and relying on the people- his eyes glazed over.”

“Sounds like he’s pretty jaded,” Kugo said quietly. “You think...”

“...there was an incident with a Villain during his middle school days. He was left in the Sludge Villains hold for twenty minutes while heroes stood off to the side. Apparently, they didn’t even attempt to extract him because it was too dangerous.”

The disgust in Tsunagu’s voice told Kugo exactly what he thought of that.

“While that is... reprehensible, the level of distrust and wariness doesn’t add up. One incident can’t have caused all of that.”

Tsunagu hummed.

“You’re right. I think a lot of that distrust stems from what caused my own bias to form.”

“The Sport’s Festival?” Kugo guessed.

. “Many of the articles are... disproportionately abhorrent in concerns to what Bakugou actually did. If the boy had been reading the online articles and news outlets, it doesn’t surprise me that he’s lost respect for the general public and is wary of any heroes he interacts with.”

“What were they saying?”

“They were harsh. Far harsher on a minor than I’ve ever seen, if we’re being honest, much of the media were calling for him to not be allowed to be a hero at all.”

Kugo winced.

“Exactly,” Tsunagu agreed. “It’s why I wanted to take him on in the first place. I thought if I could force some lessons on having positive public relations on him during the internship, things might go smoother for him. I didn’t anticipate I’d be dealing with someone so guarded though.”

“No offense, but he’s a kid whose been facing negative media backlash for months,” Kugo said carefully. “And then a Pro-Hero wants to spend his first internship- one he’d probably been really looking forward to, talking about how important the ‘publics’ views are, probably the one thing he absolutely did not want to deal with at the time.”

Tsunagu paused, straightening and looking directly at Kugo for the first time in this conversation.

“I... had not thought about that.”

“Don’t you remember what your first internship was like?” Kugo asked gently. “Kids who don’t even have licenses yet. They want to see you take down bad guys or be involved in planning patrols or learning how to tie knots when securing a large number of Villains.”

“That is all superficial stuff. Bakugou takes being a Hero far too seriously to be invested in such silly...”

Kugo shook his head.

“You can be the most serious kid in the world, but you’ll still get excited over being behind the tape when taking down bad guys. Everyone knows first internships are about the flare, teaching them a trick or two, and then sending them back to school.”

“That would have been wasting both Bakugou’s time and my own.”

Kugo chuckled at his overly serious friend.

Tsunagu was a hard worker, probably the hardest worker Kugo knew and he had an infinitely kind heart. The number four hero did not understand kids though and he definitely didn’t understand that

sometimes it was more important to bring hope to a person rather than tackle their greatest obstacle head on.

There was a reason first internships were only a week long.

“In any case,” Tsunagu informed him. “I’ve invited him back to intern with me again. UA told me they’ll be petitioning to do private hero licensing this summer since the school was targeted by Villains. They want to make sure their students have the legal rights to take on Villains as a safety precaution.”

“They’re a bit young, aren’t they?” Kugo asked. “Normally it’s not until the end of their second year. Right now, they’re not even midway through their first semester.”

“While I agree wholeheartedly with that assessment, Nezu has proven to be a rather stubborn and opportunistic individual. Ensuring his students are out on the streets earlier than any in the country is just another power move on his part demonstrating how UA is better than the rest. For me, it means I can snatch Bakugou up again much sooner and for a longer period of time so that I can chip away at that ten-foot-thick wall he has around himself.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out, though if he wasn’t pleased with the agency the first time around he might not come back for that second chance. You might have to find a different route.”

Tsunagu grimaced.

“I might have gone overboard with the grooming.”

Kugo eyed a group of men speeding towards the bank two blocks down. He radioed the officers to start moving in and gestured for Best Jeanist to start tightening his hold on the fiber laced traps they had set up along the edge of the streets. As then men came to a screeching halt and began to step out of the car, their bodies were all physically ripped from their weapons, seven would be robbers tied to the lamp posts all around the facility along the streets. Police officers moved in, reading them their rights as they removed weapons and began putting quirk restraints on the exposed wrists.

“Awe, bud, grooming?” Kugo murmured, trying to fight a grin from forming on his face, as he turned away from the scene down below. “You’re definitely going to have to find a different route if you went full mother hen on him.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that.”

“What would you prefer I call it? Your need to groom people as a means of attempting comfort because you lack the ability to emote to them your affection and care?” Kugo teased. “Or perhaps we should say it is your attempts to ‘fix the outside when you don’t know how to fix the inside?’ Mother Henning is less bogged down by psychological phrases that don’t quite fit anyways.”

“This is why they say friendships that expands past ten years are dangerous. I should end things here.”

“That’s just a thing you’ve made up on the spot.”

“See? You know me too well. I need to cut you out of my life before you irreparably damage my image with your inner knowledge of how I work.”

Kugo snorted before sighing.

“If you fail at getting him to intern with you again, I’ll take him on so that you can work with him for a few hours,” the number ten Pro-Hero said, patting Tsunagu on the head just to annoy the man, messing up the carefully combed locks of golden hair. “But only if you promise not to try to groom him.”

“The nitroglycerin in his hair makes it redundant work anyways,” Tsunagu acquiesced.

...

...

...

“The what?”

At the sound of police officers at his door, Best Jeanist stood to his full height, not an insignificant thing. A detective strode at the front of the police officers, a glint in his eyes as he looked around the Hero Agency, sight lingering on his sidekicks.

Thoroughly alarmed now, Tsunagu cleared his throat to draw the man's attention.

"Detective? Can I ask why you have... intruded in such a manner?" He kept his tone polite if clipped.

The man, handsome if a bit plain, if Tsunagu were to be fully honest, stepped forward with a determined gait and now that they were close, he recognized him as the Head Detective on the League of Villains case. Much of that night was muddled in his mind a bit though. Not as clear as most of his jobs, for obvious reasons.

The ache still throbbed through his chest even months later.

"It is good to see you up and about again, Jeanist," the Detective told him, sounding sincere. "I wish I was here on good terms."

"And what terms are you here on?" Tsunagu demanded, for once impatient in the niceties.

"We're here to interrogate your sidekicks and their involvement in a harassment case concerning Katsuki Bakugou."

All the air left Tsunagu's lungs. His eyes slid over to his sidekicks. Most, thankfully, looked confused as those words rang through his agency. Others though... they refused to meet Tsunagu's eyes. And a few looked *guilty*, their shoulders hunched and turned away almost completely from him.

'What have you done?'

"I see," he said slowly, keeping the anger and disappointment deep inside of him under lock and key. "You have my permission to do all that you need. And, of course, I submit myself to interrogation under your... a truth quirk, isn't it?"

While he asked the Detective for clarification, it was his sidekicks who he watched. The tension in the air tripling at his soft words. He watched the color drain from some of their faces. Three... four... six... of them. Six of his thirteen present sidekicks.

"Three of my sidekicks have the day off. I will ask them to come in for a bit. Six of my sidekicks are currently patrolling for me about the city, but I imagine they will be back by the time you finish your interrogation with all here."

“Thank you for your cooperation, Best Jeanist,” the Detective bowed slightly.

“Of course, it shames me to hear any Hero would be harassing someone, no less a fifteen-year-old child not even out of school yet,” his tone was icy, the tension in the room rising with each word he spoke. “Should we find the perpetrators of such a crime in my agency, the punishment, outside of whatever charges you see fit, will be as heavy as I am capable of.”

With those heavy words clogging the air of his agency, Best Jeanist followed the Detective into one of his conference rooms. A police officer followed them inside with a notepad, sitting in a seat across from them.

“Officer Digress has a quirk called ‘Copywrite.’” The Detective told him pleasantly. “He will copy your words down and any subtext of your words will automatically appear beneath your own words.”

“Subtext?” Tsunagu questioned, curious, but not worried.

“Let’s say you tell us about a baseball game with your friend and when you recount the story, you tell us your friend enjoyed the game quite a bit. Your subtext, picked up from your voice and words, might dictate on the page that you did not enjoy the game but were willing to go for your friend.”

“I see. That is a very useful quirk, especially when paired with your own,” Tsunagu noted, eyeing the detective.

Officer Digress spoke up then, and Tsunagu was startled to find the man had already started copying his words.

“You think its overkill to have two powerful truth quirks working on a harassment case, but you do appreciate that Katsuki Bakugou is being watched after so thoroughly.”

Tsunagu’s hands tightened under the table.

“Accurate, though it does make me uncomfortable how accurate and how specific the information you just took from me was,” Tsunagu admitted.

The detective nodded.

“Fair enough. It does unnerve most. Two truth quirk users are being

used in this case because of a few different reasons, the first being that Katsuki Bakugou, due to his connection to both All Might and the League of Villains, is a high-profile public figure now. The second reason is new information coming to light that has revealed extensive threats to the boy's life."

"What?" Tsunagu felt his neutral mask slip for a moment, taken on more of the alarm he felt on the inside. "Threats from who? Not my... I can't imagine *any* of them..."

His sidekicks had their flaws. Tsunagu never doubted that. The idea that they could say a few dickish things to Bakugou was far too easy to imagine. Maybe even a few nasty text messages, at the worst. And he'd thoroughly planned on punishing them for such a disgraceful show, but... he knew these young men. He *knew* them. None of them would ever...

The Detective held up his hand.

"First, I have a few questions."

Tsunagu stilled, trying not to glance out of the conference room at his sidekicks.

"Did you leak Katsuki Bakugou's phone number to the public?"

Tsunagu closed his eyes, pained by those words and the implication it implied.

"No," he grits out.

"Were you aware of anyone inside your agency leaking Katsuki Bakugou's phone number?"

"No."

"Did you send any text messages to Katsuki Bakugou or contact him in any way after he left this agency?"

"I sent one text to Aizawa making sure he made it back to the school safely. I also sent in the standard report to UA about my observations of Katsuki Bakugou, but I did not in any way, text messages or otherwise, contact him after he got on the train back to his school grounds."

"Were you aware, in any capacity, of your sidekicks sending messages

to Katsuki Bakugou?”

Tsunagu swallowed.

“No.”

The Detective nodded.

“Okay, I’m pretty sure I know the answer, but I want to make sure we cover all of our bases, alright?”

Tsunagu nodded.

“Text messages from your sidekicks to one Katsuki Bakugou ranged from telling him he would never make a good hero to telling him that he should not be a hero at all. That if he really wanted to help people that he would be better off never getting his Hero’s license at all. That the only way for him to be a good person would be to never speak again.”

Tsunagu felt sick to his stomach. All he can see in his mind’s eye is the kid struggling, trying his *damnest* to do well with each person they came across. The mounting frustration on both their parts when Bakugou isn’t able to communicate well with the public. Wasn’t able to communicate well at all. The fact that Tsunagu had to question him over and over again to figure out what the kid was about.

The too wide smile showing his canines, an edge of challenge there, a vicious turn of his mouth. His natural smile a touch too aggressive and intimidating for the average person. The one that looked so far out from his own or the woman’s they’d been taking a picture with.

The faltering hesitation whenever he was faced with a stranger.

“If you HAD known about the harassing text messages from your sidekicks,” the Detective asks him. “Would you have stopped it?”

“Yes,” Tsunagu whispers.

“While Katsuki Bakugou was interning here, did you notice anything off between Katsuki and your sidekicks?”

“I made a bad judgment call when I took Katsuki Bakugou on. After reading his file and seeing the Sport’s Festival, I thought he was a spoiled brat. His parents are well known and very successful Designers. He was immensely talented and both the Sport’s Festival

and his grades pointed to high intelligence. I thought I was taking on a delinquent with too much money and power for anyone to try to teach him humility or manners.”

Tsunagu looked the Detective in the eye.

“I declared such when he walked through my doors, in front of my sidekicks, because I thought it was important to lay down a strong foundation of no bullshit. I wanted him to be aware that I would not tolerate any bad behavior. I laid down that precedent. My sidekicks were... wary and unwelcoming of Bakugou.” Tsunagu paused to gather himself before continuing.

“When he first got here, I thought that was a good thing, that the boy would know that no one would be willing to put up with any shenanigans he might try to pull. As the week went on though, my interns and Sidekicks were... polite, but borderline unkind in their exclusion of him in conversation and hang outs. I tried to fix my mistake, it was not my intentions to isolate him from everyone with my words, but as a simple warning not to not act out. I *wanted* my sidekicks to include him. To show Bakugou what it meant to take responsibility and to conduct oneself well. To socialize him with those who I knew to be good influences. Instead I created an atmosphere of separation and animosity.”

“And how was your behavior?” The Detective asked. “You stated that ‘you thought’ you were taking on a delinquent. A spoiled brat. So how did your behavior change throughout the week?”

“We spent the first day talking... or well, we spent it role playing. One of my sidekicks, Reju, would pretend to be a civilian and Bakugou would react to them. I thought it was a good way to practice public interactions without potentially harming Bakugou’s reputation and the agencies. Any time he would say something aggressive or negative, I would question him or give advice, but as we went through these proceedings, I was quickly thrown off by Bakugou. He was not what I was expecting.”

“How so?”

Tsunagu found his eyes wandering down to the badge on the man’s chest. ‘Tsukauchi’ sat snug and clean upon his chest pocket, gleaming with the declaration of his position. Tsunagu found that, even without the threat of a truth quirk, he would feel compelled to tell him the truth. There was something entirely genuine about him that drew you

in. He also appreciated how thorough and careful the man was being.

“Bakugou is rough around the edges, there is certainly no doubt about that. However, he is very well behaved. He followed my orders to a T the second I gave them with no complaint. He did each job efficiently and timely. There was no point where he complained about the hours I was working with him or asked for a break. He was hardworking and earnest in everything he did, even those things which I knew he hated. His vocabulary was atrocious, but he was honest in everything he said. There was one notable problem though.”

“And what was that?” Tsukauchi asked, raising an eyebrow as he watched Tsunagu intently, the irises seeming to jump across his form, rarely meeting his eyes.

“Bakugou is very observant. Throughout the week I tested his observation skills with those around the office and those out in public. He was often able to read a situation better than even I could. Details that I hadn’t noticed until he called attention to them, but, and I can’t stress this enough, it took extensive questioning on my part to pry those observations from him. He can read a situation better than most but when it comes to putting those thoughts into words... I have never met anyone in my life whose communication skills were so lacking. Constantly asking him for clarification often led to a twenty-minute conversation just to figure out how he came to his conclusions and what he thought of them.”

“And most people don’t have the time or patients for that,” Tsukauchi mused.

“Quite right. Despite Bakugou being honest, his words are rarely well-spoken. His ability to convey that honestly is hidden so deeply in his aggressive, foul style of speaking that there is hardly a soul we encountered who reacted well to him even when he was trying desperately to follow my orders of one compliment per civilian.”

Tsunagu, paused, gathering his thoughts.

“I grew rather fond of him in his week of interning with me, but I would be remiss to not say that our interactions consisted primarily of frustration on both sides. Our personalities conflicted on a fundamental level and while I think we could have breached that gap given more time, there is no way to call our interactions as ‘going well.’ Tense, exhausting, and frustrated is the best way I can call it.”

“Thank you for your honesty in this,” Tsukauchi asked him. “Perhaps

you and Bakugou have more in common than you think. I rarely get to interrogate someone as... self-aware as you appear to be.”

“That self-awareness came from years of therapy and being best friends with Kugo... King Orca. Believe me, while I had a vague sense that I was a bit uptight, it was quite the awakening to learn I came off as a stiff prude. And a lot of work to accept it as truth and to try to be better about it,” Tsunagu said with a wry smile. His mouth turned downwards though as he remembered what they were here for. “I suppose we’ll have to start bringing my sidekicks in.”

“That we will,” Tsukauchi informed him grimly. “I’d like to start with Reju. You’re more than welcome to stay as long as you keep out of the way though. Under normal circumstances, your presence would be a deterrent to getting to the bottom of things, but since Digress and I are here, it actually aides us to having you in the room.”

“Thank you.”

He moved over into one of the other conference chairs so that Reju could sit directly in front of the detective. He felt a pit of anger open up at Reju as the man walked in as if on death roll. The man was his second in command. The one he *trusted* with the agency when he was out of commission. The man who stayed late with Tsunagu on one of the worst missions of his career where they’d come across a sex trafficking ring of young girls. Reju had stayed until every girl had contact with their family. Until each victim was ensured a safe place that night.

Reju was a good man.

Yet he walked into this office with all the tell-tale signs of a criminal caught in the act. The man flinched under his gaze, taking his seat with little grace, staring at the floor like he could somehow convince the white carpet to devour him whole.

“Michi Reju,” Detective Tsukauchi started, his voice lacking all the warmth he’d reserved for Tsunagu. “Did you leak Katsuki Bakugou’s phone number to the public?”

The man’s eyes were wide and uncertain and for a moment, Tsunagu held out hope that it had not been him.

“Yes.”

The hope shattered.

“Why did you leak Katsuki Bakugou’s phone number?”

The man’s lips pressed tight, something flashing there.

“Isn’t this a bit much? Are his famous parents really going to make a big deal out of... what? A few mean texts?”

Disappointment filled him at Reju’s words. He closed his eyes and massaged his forehead as he tried to wrap his mind around those words.

Officer Digress spoke up.

“You think the spoiled brat is making a big deal out of nothing. That whatever happened with the phone leak that it must not be a big deal and that the brat deserved to be taken down a peg or two,” the officer read back the subtext.

“I didn’t say that...” Reju said, glancing harshly at Digress. “Please don’t put words in my mouth.”

“It’s his quirk,” Detective Tsukauchi explained easily. “My own quirk tells me that you are very stressed, but also worried. Worried for yourself, but also for the kid. You suspect something foul is going on. You also feel resentment and disbelief. You are conflicted.”

Reju’s breath hitched and his face turned ashen.

“Perhaps you are unwilling to be truthful to yourself, but we know. Now, answer the question, why did you leak his number?”

“I thought...” Reju hesitated, glancing around the room, flinching again when he caught sight of Tsunagu watching him. “The kid didn’t learn anything while he was here. He was awful and mean the whole time he was here. You can’t... those kind of people shouldn’t be dealing with victims. Victims don’t deserve to go through such terrible events and then be met with the likes of Bakugou saving them. Traumatizing them worse. Hurting them even if not physically, then disregarding their well fair.”

Reju looked up, pleading.

“I just wanted to teach him a bit of a lesson. Try to get him to pick a different career field. Being a Pro-hero is more than just... beating up bad guys. This isn’t the right field for someone like him.”

“Is that why you didn’t leave your name with your text messages?” Tsukauchi asked, the unnatural dilation of his eyes seeming to widen even further.

“I... that wasn’t my best moment, you’re right, but the kid comes from money and I didn’t want to hurt my career if he wanted revenge for a few messages,” Reju gestured outwards as if to say ‘like this.’

“You knew what you were doing was wrong,” Tsukauchi said sternly. “And you didn’t want to get caught.”

Reju’s lips pressed together.

“Yes... I suppose that would be the best way to put it. I was in the wrong.”

Tsukauchi’s head tilted.

“You don’t believe that you were in the wrong though,” the detective said sharply. “That’s a lie.”

Reju let out a breath of frustration.

“No, no, not really. I know what I did was wrong but letting Katsuki Bakugou become a Pro-Hero is so much worse. He doesn’t deserve to be a hero.”

Slowly, Tsukauchi leaned down and unclipped his suitcase, he pulled out a thick stack of papers, the size of a novel.

“Do you know what this is?” Tsukauchi asked, his voice had turned odd, not unlike some of his tougher Villain opponents when they thought they had Tsunagu cornered. It was the voice of a predator about to strike its prey.

“Obviously not,” Reju said, sounding annoyed now.

Tsunagu leaned forward in his chair, trying to subtly read the top of the document.

“It’s the phone records of Katsuki Bakugou from the day after he left this agency to when he was forced to turn off his phone five weeks ago.”

Shock filled Tsunagu.

“14,000 + text messages. I’ve not even managed to get through the

first 1/3 of these this week. Would you like me to read some of them to you?" Tsukauchi asked. "I won't even find the worst ones... I'll just..." The detective flopped the pages open. "...I'll just read one at random. How does that sound?"

Reju's eyes were blown wide as he stared at the thick pile of papers.

Tsukauchi cleared his throat.

"I saw you on the train once. Boy how I wanted to throw you up against the window and see just how much fight you put up."

Tsunagu felt his fibers vibrate in rage at those words. Felt them threaten to unweave themselves under the hold of his quirk.

Tsukauchi flipped to another random page.

"I've met Villains less violent than you. Have your parents considered keeping you permanently in quirk suppressants? It would be safer for all of us."

Tsukauchi flipped to another random page.

"If I ever see you outside of UA, I'll strip you of all your memories. Give you a second chance to be a better person."

The papers were closed with a 'snap.' The pile hitting the table with a 'BANG.'

"Katsuki Bakugou had no intentions of ever letting anyone know about this," Tsukauchi continued, going in for the kill. "According to his father, Katsuki had been keeping his phone turned off for weeks and left it behind when he moved into the dorms at UA. It was only because I was investigating what the League was trying to use Katsuki for that I stumbled upon this."

Tsukauchi leaned in towards Reju.

"Do you know who else contacted Bakugou using the number you leaked?"

If only concerned about his white carpets, Tsunagu used his fibers to move a trash can in front of Reju, who looked moments away from puking.

"Answer the man, Reju," Tsunagu said calmly.

Reju shook his head.

“No, no, I... I don’t under...” Reju gripped the table beside him. The items on the table beginning to levitate, including the papers, as the man’s quirk lost control for a moment. Reju blinked hard, the items falling with a crash back down, startling everyone outside of the conference room. “I never meant for something like... like *this* to happen!”

“I believe you,” Tsukauchi said evenly. “Unfortunately, the League of Villains didn’t care about your intent. They used the phone number you so freely gave away to let Katsuki Bakugou know that he was being stalked. They used the number to send him pictures of himself and to note what he was doing and when he was doing it. And then they used his GPS location for the phone number you freely gave out to find him at the camp.”

Reju vomited into the trash in front of him.

“It...” the man looked shaken to his core. “No. No. You’re lying! I can’t have... I didn’t cause that attack.”

“Not directly,” Tsukauchi allowed, voice cold as a tundra. “They most likely would have found another way to get the location. They might have had one of their members follow the bus, since they sent Katsuki Bakugou a picture of the bus station he was sitting at as part of their harassment of him. Your actions were simply the easiest means of getting to the fifteen-year-old. They didn’t need to put extra effort into finding the location since you gave it to them on a silver platter of pettiness. But you do understand that sharing a minor’s phone number with the public, in and of itself, is inexcusable and will have repercussions?”

“Yes,” Reju said quietly. “I understand.”

Tsunagu couldn’t tell what Reju felt. Regret? Shame? There was too much shock written along the lines of his sidekick’s body and he doubted that even Reju would be able to fully comprehend what his actions had caused.

He himself was having a hard time grasping it.

“The League itself was harassing Bakugou?” Tsunagu asked.

He’d heard the words just fine, but they didn’t feel real. The thick stack of papers on his conference table didn’t feel real.

Tsukauchi turned to him then, his eyes looking impossibly sad.

“Do you want to know what’s really sick?” The detective asked, tapping the stack of papers. “The League of Villains texts were the kindest ones in here.”

Dead silence filled the room. Even Digress had stopped writing.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

Chapter 14: Smile

Remedial training with Todoroki. Therapy. Katsuki attempts to 'fix' his smile. Mina attempts to teach Katsuki something important.

Protective Instincts

Chapter Summary

Katsuki avoids an emotional confrontation like a Pro.

The word describing his feelings that our emotionally stunted Todoroki is searching for so desperately is 'Protective.'

Someone finally discovers the Ring.

Chapter Notes

Had to break the chapter into two again.

Chapter 14: Protective Instincts

Chapter 15: Smile

Chapter 14: Protective Instincts

Saturdays meant remedial training. Which meant that rather than face his classmates after yesterday, he could sneak out in the early hours of the morning to wait at the entrance to leave.

Which did fuck all for dealing with Todoroki.

The heterochromatic eyes bore into him as they approach. The neutral poker face the bastard is known for is twitching, as if it wants to fall into something more dramatic. Like a frown or maybe indigestion.

It stays true to form though as he walks up and leans against the entranceway opposite of Katsuki. He huffs as he realizes they probably look like a pair of elite jackasses guarding UA now.

Katsuki doesn't want to see Aizawa even less than he wants to see Todoroki. He's never done what he did yesterday. And he's not sure how they're supposed to be in the same space at the same time after last night.

He feels *exposed*.

He feels *stupid*.

He failed to win against Mirio. He pulled a Deku, breaking his ankle like that, for no fucking reason other than his head thought he was somewhere he wasn't. He messed up by falling asleep in the gym. He caused everyone problems even after he'd promised to work towards fixing those things.

And then he'd sobbed, like a little bitch, in his teacher's arms.

The Hag would be downright ashamed.

Katsuki rubs at his wrist, the Q is already smeared despite only having been applied a little bit ago. He takes out his phone and fiddles with it.

There's a long series of missed calls and text messages from last night that he hasn't bothered to look through yet. Anything is better than trying to ignore Icyhot's dramatic stare down.

Kirishima: Hey man, getting kinda late. Just checking in on you.

Horns: Kirishima's pacing, Blasty, pacing.

Pikachu: If you make us look for you while our asses are on fire, I'm gonna be pissed. Also... rude dude. Rude. I know that you know that Aoyama's food was gonna do this to us and you did us dirty leaving like that.

Sero: Midoriya sprinted out the door all green lightning like. If you're good then just send us a text and sneak back in through your window. We'll cover you.

Deku: Kacchan, I know you don't want to talk to me, but we'd all appreciate a phone call or a text or smoke signal or bomb going off in the distance. I'm not picky. Collapse a building if you need to but let us know your doing okay.

Sensei: Call me. Now.

Four-eyes: We are setting up search perimeters and covering the school grounds. The teachers are searching for you off Campus. I hope you are safe and that this precautionary measure turns out to be unnecessary.

The texts went on and on like that. Becoming slightly more frantic as the hours ticked by. Before finally Tokoyami forwarded a text to everyone's numbers. It was an .image.

Katsuki grimaced as he clicked on the picture, feeling a sick pit in his stomach form as it loaded. A sense of Déjà vu. Though he knew Tokoyami had no ill intention by taking the photo and sending it.

It showed him sleeping, his head on his gym bag.

Katsuki grimaced at the stark dark circles under his eyes and his pale complexion in the picture. Underneath the picture were two words: "He's okay."

Guilt ate at his insides.

'Fuck me.'

"Alriiiiiiiiiiiiiight, listeners," Katsuki jumped a foot in the air, turning to see Present Mic walking up. "Aizawa is sleeping in this morning so I'll be accompanying you to your extra classes!"

Katsuki trudged behind the two, sliding into the car and keeping his eyes down on his phone, trying to figure out a way to derail the tomfuckery that would greet him when he got back.

Kirishima: Glad you're safe. 😊

Deku: Kacchan, could we talk?

Horns: We need a squad night. You can't get out of it now, Blasty.

Pikachu: I just want you to know... some stuff happened while we were looking for you. It involved various bathrooms around campus. Someone, I'm not naming names, because I will take it to my grave, did not make it. There was one stall where we were at and I was not going to lose.

Sero: That was the worst night of my life. Kaminari fucking

shocked me and I'm fully blaming you.

Katsuki choked on his spit. A guffaw falling out before he could help it.

From the other side of the car, Todoroki blinked at him, doing his best imitation of an Owl.

“You put us all through a lot of shit last night,” Todoroki said evenly, blunt as always. “I’m not sure what you think is so funny.”

The air left his lungs and Katsuki found himself howling with laughter, having to put his head between his knees to keep his breathing even.

He ignored Deku’s text, instead adding the Squad to a group chat.

Katsuki: I'll cook dinner for you guys this week.

Gang Orca works them hard all morning. Katsuki enjoys the burn along his muscles. They are focusing on basic detection and Katsuki spends the whole training session flying around the field and relaying Victim positions to the Baldy, the guy Todoroki got into a pissing contest with during the Exams.

The overly cheerful giant responds well to Katsuki’s minimal instructions. Following Katsuki’s GPS drops and taking care of the victims with a gentleness Katsuki doesn’t think he’s capable of. It boggles his mind that this is the fucker who duked it out with Icyhot, but he wasn’t there and Katsuki has his own shitty nerd who most think couldn’t hurt a fly. So he keeps his thoughts to himself and lets Icyhot mutter about the Wind quirk user to his hearts content. It’s oddly hilarious to hear the half and half bastard look so annoyed just being in the guy’s presence.

Soon enough though its time for his meeting with Kobayashi.

“Aren’t you coming?” Todoroki calls out to him as begins to head

towards the cafeteria.

Katsuki gives him the stink eye.

The half and half bastard knows Katsuki doesn't eat lunch with everyone else. They've spent the last several remedial courses traveling together and Katsuki never goes into the cafeteria with the others. The fucker is doing some weird passive thing to ask Katsuki where he's going instead of asking outright.

Instead, he holds up the lunch he made for himself at the dorms, shaking it obnoxiously, because like hell is he going to tell Mr. fucking candy cane where he's actually going. Todoroki frowns at him.

"You can still eat with us, even if you already have food."

Normally this is where Katsuki would flip him off. But he's trying not to do things like that. His hands do twitch around the box and there's an amused part of him that recognizes its literally second nature.

'We gonna sing Kumbaya when we get there?' Sits at the tip of his tongue.

"I have stuff I need to do," Katsuki says instead, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"What kind of stuff," Todoroki asks because apparently he thinks the rest of the world should offer their life story up in public places too.

'None of your fucking business stuff.'

Katsuki shrugs, deciding it will just be easier if he ignores him outright and heads out, but before he can leave there's a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Wherever you're going... I don't think you should go," Todoroki tells him, voice sharp.

The *effort* it takes not to roll his eyes actually hurts.

"What?" He asks, exasperated and annoyed as he looks at the time. He's almost late and he'd really rather not deal with a pissy Kobayashi when the regular one was already so unpleasant.

Todoroki shifts from foot to foot, he doesn't seem sure of himself at all.

“It’s just... you don’t seem okay when you come back from eating alone,” Todoroki says stiffly. “If that’s what you’re doing...”

God damnit.

He had to give him some kind of answer or by some unholy force of dysfunctional, unhealthy curiosity he shares with Deku this bastard would find out what he was doing. Katsuki’s tempted to beat his own head into the wall out of frustration.

He takes a deep breath, the rough, sturdy material of his hero costume a good grounding mechanism. His fingers click against the metal knee caps. Cold. Smooth. He looks around the cafeteria at the 15 odd students around them who failed the rescue portion of the exams.

“These extras lost because they didn’t study enough. You’re here because you got into a bit of a tit for tat with someone,” Katsuki says slowly. “But I’m here because I wasn’t nice enough.”

Todoroki looks as if he’s trying to dissect him with his eyes.

“So?”

“They just have me meeting with someone to help fix my public image,” Katsuki says, and if a bit of his exhaustion creeps in, well, Todoroki doesn’t call him out for it. Candy cane just hums in sympathy.

“Okay,” Todoroki tells him, even though he still looks unsure.

“Glad you approve,” Katsuki says dryly, before biting his lip. It’s hard to reign himself in every time. Especially after yesterday. He released all that bottled up shit. Embarrassed himself like some waste of space extra. Sobbing like a god damn toddler with a scraped up knee... or Deku.

In front of Aizawa.

He’s not looking forward to seeing him again when they get back. The idea of looking him in the eye after he made such a fool of himself leaves a sour taste in his mouth. Aizawa hadn’t even made a big deal of it once he’d finally calmed down.

No words about how he needed to pick himself up.

No blame for being weak.

No accusations that he caused his little break down.

No impatience for not being able to get up immediately.

It left Katsuki feeling twitchy. Waiting around for the inevitable shitstorm that was always the fallout when Katsuki made the mistake of slipping up in front of someone. Because that couldn't be it.

He turns away from Todoroki and pops open his lunch, using his chopsticks to shove the food in as he walked. Half and half doesn't follow him, apparently satisfied. He only finishes a third of his food before he's popping the door open and plopping onto the seat across from the she-devil.

She ticks off a box in a rather ominous fashion and Katsuki feels that same painful ache in his eyes as he forces himself not to roll them.

Katsuki rubs at his wrist, the **Q** he rewrote there this morning suddenly seems too obvious. Like she'll know what it means just by spotting it. It's only been a day, but there's already a lingering red along his skin where he's been rubbing with calloused fingers too much.

"How has the Association been working for you?" Dr. Kobayashi asks.

'It's shit.'

At least he can curse inside his own mind.

"Who gave you a License anyways?" Katsuki says instead, keeping his voice in that tone his mother uses when she's speaking to her clients or models she disdains. "All offenses meant, this doesn't really strike me as entirely legal. I feel like you're toeing the line and not on the right side of it."

"I assure you that all laws have been abided," she says evenly. "And my degree is on the wall."

Her pen clicks, pointing to a hastily put together office space in the corner. Katsuki's eyebrows raise.

"You have *other* clients here?" Katsuki asks, skeptically.

"Careful, Katsuki, your egotism is showing," her smile stretched as she wrote a note on her little stupid notepad. "The commission has other

Pros who have less than stellar reputations who I'm assisting with their... less than ideal personality traits. Though you'll be pleased to learn that you rank number one for most troublesome!"

She laughed.

"Your deflection of my question isn't going to get you out of answering it though," she continued. "There is a marked improvement in your vocabulary already, at least, even if you have still found a way to be unpleasant. So I'll mark the Associations as a success."

Katsuki presses down hard on the Q as he watches her write. The ring shocks him and Katsuki jerks in place, keeping himself quiet. Though she still notices. Her eyes honing in on him and tutting.

"About to throw a temper tantrum, were you? I'm glad to see the ring is keeping you in check."

"What I think," Katsuki says slowly through grit teeth, "is that you didn't consider my biology before making me wear it."

"I'm sure *you* know better than the scientists on I-Island that created the technology," she said mockingly. "Has it been stopping you from losing your temper? Saying things in anger?"

Does avoiding human contact count? The argument with Kaminari and then the argument with Sero had both led to him getting fucking shocked over and over again. So he'd taken to laying low and avoiding people all together.

The problem was that after the first shock, he only became more stressed trying to not get shocked again, which caused him to get shocked a second time. And then a third. And then a fourth.

It was a learning experience for him though.

Katsuki hadn't realized how bad the stress he got during social interactions was until the fucking zappity piece of shit was around his ankle. He knew he didn't like it. He knew he had a tendency to get overwhelmed if he spent too much time around too many people. But fuck. He was getting shocked for things he'd thought only mildly bothered him.

Like Kaminari invading his personal space by sitting too close to him.

Or someone walking behind him without him noticing.

Or being asked to go out in public for a hang out.

"It hasn't stopped anything," Katsuki told her bluntly. "All its done is irritate my ankle."

For the first time in the conversation she looked genuinely annoyed by him.

"The ring is only as successful as you allow it to be. If you are blatantly ignoring it when you lose your temper then all you are doing is hurting yourself," Kobayashi told him. "Perhaps we need to program the shock to be a little stronger."

Fuck.

He didn't know she could do that.

"I'm listening to the piece of junk," Katsuki hissed in fury.

It shocked him again.

He takes a deep breath, digging his nails into his skin, pressing his thumb deeper into his wrist. The skin feels irritated, it stings the tiniest bit. There's a coffee stain on the coffee table in front of him and a mug with purple lipstick staining the edge of the cup. He looks up at Kobayashi and yeah... its barely noticeable because she's so pale, her veins pop out against her skin, that the light purple of her lips looks almost natural on her. Like she's someone who naturally doesn't get enough air.

"Maybe you are," she hums in agreement, eyes drilling into him almost approvingly. "You seem to do well with reinforcements then. The goals sheet you submitted to me last time shows a level of self-awareness I had not expected. Have you started working on any of them?"

Katsuki twitches.

"Blunt Honesty," he tells her through gritted teeth.

She pulls out a copy of his list, her eyes examining it over the rim of her glasses.

"You seem to not be doing well if these are your goals for that."

"You're my therapist," Katsuki said dryly (bitterly). "Aren't you the one person I'm supposed to be bluntly honest with?"

She chuckles.

"I suppose you do have a point there. Give me an example of a success then."

Katsuki thinks back to the week. Struggling with the squad encroaching on his personal space. They'd started to gather around him to do homework with him for his half hour sessions of 'socializing.' Which was fine. What was not so fucking great was the way they tried to all fit on the same couch or how they leaned on his back at times, looking over his shoulder, making it hard not to think about a hand clamping around his neck, pulling him through darkness from behind. What was not okay was how loud they got right in his ear or how close they wanted to sit by him when he moved to the floor instead.

He thinks of Deku. The shitty nerd trying to approach with his tentative smile and an interrogation of Katsuki's headspace for Deku's own peace of mind. That knowing fucking look about him that says *'your falling apart, aren't you Kacchan? You can't hack it, can you Kacchan? I know you and we both know you aren't good enough.'*

The look that makes his skin itch and makes him feel the need to look over his shoulder for eyes constantly watching him. Judging him for every decision he makes, every word he says, everything he *doesn't* do. For the look that says: *'You missed something and you don't even know what it is, do you Kacchan?'*

Katsuki *hates* that look. And he's been feeling it pinned against him for days now because Deku makes sure to be in the common area when he's there. Since that second day when he realized what was going on.

Katsuki hasn't blown up though.

Not at anyone.

The party is going strong and he's finally managed to force himself to deal with it until the time he can run up to his room and deal with the fallout.

"There's this person..." Katsuki starts slowly.

He's never actually talked about Deku to anyone outside of screaming matches with his mother. Not even to Deku. He stops. Feeling faintly like he's... betraying something. She shouldn't be the first person he talks about Deku to. It doesn't feel right. It makes his skin crawl and

feel clammy at the same time.

“Kaminari,” Katsuki says, changing tracks quickly. “He fu... He pisses me of...” Katsuki chokes. Ibara Shiozaki has her vines wrapped around him, he’s pinned to the ground and he can’t breathe. He can’t move and she’s smirking down at him, her hands still clasped in her ‘peaceful’ pose as the crowd cheers her own. Fear strikes through his chest like a spike, a helplessness that makes his breath hitch.

And then he’s back in the room.

The feelings lingering.

He hasn’t accidentally used that one yet. He shudders, shaking, trying to ground himself and failing.

“We should probably reinforce those before you leave,” Kobayashi says casually. “We wouldn’t want you slipping into old habits.”

Endeavor has a publicist.

Shoto has met his father’s publicist. He’s sat in those painful meetings. No matter how bored Shoto is with what they have to say, he’s never come out with the type of glazed look Bakugou has when he joins them for the second half of their remedial training.

But Bakugou does everything perfectly.

He doesn’t stumble or stop.

As Gang Orca is calling out instructions, the Pro never needs to correct Bakugou and Bakugou hits the highest numbers of anyone, including Shoto whose too distracted by how... *quiet* Bakugou is being.

King Orca yells at him twice to get his head in the game.

By time the training is over and their heading towards the car with Present Mic, his back hurts from getting whacked more than once by the fake villain's Gang Orca has prowling around distracting them from rescues. Bakugou slinks in beside him like a ghost, and it's so out of character for his... friend? Not in the same way he’s friends with Midoriya. Or Iida or Uraraka. Or YaoMomo.

Shoto is learning that each friendship is entirely unique. An odd concept, but he supposes that each of his relationships with his family members are so different from one another they can hardly be compared. To realize it's the same with every relationship he has and will ever form sort of scares him.

But he likes it.

He tries to nudge Bakugou with his shoulder like he and Midoriya do sometimes when they sit side by side, but it elicits a jerk. Bakugou practically throws himself to the other side of the car and adheres himself there.

Okay then.

Let's not do that.

The only thing that makes him feel better is that Present Mic seems just as bewildered and concerned by that as he is. The man fiddles with his headpiece, eyes not so subtly watching Bakugou.

"You okay, little listener?"

Bakugou doesn't answer.

After a long moment of silence as the car starts to roll, Present Mic takes out his phone and starts texting with the speed of someone whose used to writing a novel in the little text brackets.

He'd spent most of the morning annoyed with Bakugou for his seeming dismissal of everyone's concern. Especially ignoring Midoriya who'd spent most of the night with so much restless, stressed energy that he was impersonating a washing machine more than a person. Muttering himself into a frenzy that even Uraraka couldn't seem to pull him out of.

That had faded as the afternoon came and disappeared when Bakugou returned.

What had the publicist said to him?

He felt like he was back at the train station before leaving for Internships, staring at Iida's back as their friend went off to Hosu. He'd known something was wrong back then and hadn't done anything. Not until Iida and Midoriya were already hurt.

He'd made it in time, but what if he hadn't?

And he'd chosen to wait. Thinking that it would resolve itself. That it wasn't any of his business.

That was the crux of the dilemma though. If he had spoken up and they'd fixed things beforehand then the Pro-Hero Native would be dead. Stain would probably still be at large. Iida wouldn't be the Iida that Shoto knows now.

Shoto didn't trust heroes.

Not with the open armed lack of suspicion his classmates seemed to. Endeavor taught him that. Heroes could be just as corrupt as villains. Police could harm. Adults could betray. No one had authority over Shoto until they *proved consistently* that they were worth their words.

He would never hesitate to break rules adults created if he saw them as detrimental or corrupt. That's why he didn't hesitate against Stain. Why he chose to help save Bakugou. Because the adults had proven time and time again they couldn't be trusted to handle the situation at hand.

Until they proved their word was worth listening to, Shoto found himself entirely unimpressed and unphased by their demands. Suspicious of their intentions. Even while he acknowledged that they were in control of what happened to him. So far there were a few in UA Shoto could trust to be honest and try their best to protect them even if the follow through was lacking. Trustworthy didn't necessarily equate to reliable.

Shoto wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when they'd returned to the dorms. This morning he'd left Midoriya at the kitchen table, his friends eyes looking anxiously at the elevator, waiting for Bakugou to arrive.

But Bakugou had apparently already left.

Shoto wasn't sure how to feel about that. About Bakugou himself. It was hard to put into words. Not that he'd ever been particularly skilled at verbalizing his feelings. He and his classmates had been through so much together. He felt... tethered to each of them in a way that was not dissimilar to the way he felt about his siblings.

What he did know was that it was hard to see the glazed, empty look on Bakugou's face. Every time he saw that face he had this odd urge

to... stand near him. As close as possible. To keep himself between Bakugou and anyone that wandered too close.

It was the same feeling he felt when students at UA would talk to YaoMomo, their eyes looking at her...at her... but not her face as they spoke with her. The way she'd turn away slightly, her eyes hard and upset.

It was the feeling he'd felt after hearing about Iida's brother and seeing him standing on the platform for their internships. Seeing the conflict and anger under Iida's skin, the hurt on his classmate's face when he got onto his train for Internships. How he felt seeing Iida and Midoriya on the ground, seconds away from being mercilessly cut down by Stain.

It was the feeling he felt reaching for a marble, desperate to save Bakugou and Tokoyami. Feeling the relief as he reached for the marble... the devastation when it was snatched up. The empty, black void that filled him when he saw Bakugou being dragged back through the portal by his throat.

Shoto couldn't put words into the feelings swirling around in his chest.

What he did know was that when they walked through the doors to the dorms and their classmates stood to greet them that he noticed the minute flinch and the way Bakugou hunched and instinctively, without thought, Shoto moved in front of Bakugou. Even though this was their safe place.

"Bakugou!" Kirishima's wide-eyed stare did something to Shoto too. The way the redhead looked so unsure about approaching, the way the redhead did a once over, checking Bakugou as if for physical injuries.

It made his heart feel squeezed.

Shoto turned to glance at Bakugou, the glazed look had receded a bit, and he had the odd sense that he was watching the blonde build himself back up. The way the shoulders straightened and hands that had been crossed tightly over chest, loosened... unwinding only for hands to be shoved into pockets. The hunched back forcefully leaning back as Bakugou too gave Kirishima a once over.

It was like watching a puppy confront a fox.

"Kacchan!" Kaminari called excitedly, marching up with far too much

enthusiasm. Shoto moved subtly into Kaminari's way, forcing some distance. Like a particular flexible leech, Kaminari did not pause. Simply swung his arm around Shoto's neck and *used his body* as a post to lean over and around to meet Bakugou's eye. "Do you know how to make Takoyaki? Can you make that tonight? Its my favorite."

"Soy Sauce gets first dibs on what I make," Bakugou says without missing a beat.

Shoto feels Kaminari slump against him, all the weight of the electric user pulling at his limbs as Kaminari moans dramatically, the feel of his throat reverberating against Shoto's arm. Sero walks slowly up to them, one hand in his pocket and his smile looks a little strained.

"Yeah?" Sero's voice is suspicious. "And why do I get to pick first?"

There's a challenge in his voice and Shoto feels utterly confused and downright alarmed when Bakugou snickers. He's never heard Bakugou laugh before. From across the room, Midoriya doesn't just look alarmed. He looks scared shitless.

Shoto can do nothing but blink at the way Sero's eyes land on Kaminari and the way the blonde wrapped around him like a koala stiffens, neck tilting backward at a weird angle to get a look at Sero.

"Hey buddy," Kaminari says calmly, but the way his grip tightens on Shoto's shoulder doesn't go unnoticed. "What are you thinking?"

There's an ominous crack as Sero rolls his neck, stretching his shoulders out.

"I'm wondering..." Sero said slowly. "...how many nights of detention I'm about to wrack up."

There's an ungodly wail directly into his ear. And now, Shoto is very familiar with the emotion that rolls through him, can identify it perfectly, in fact. He feels *utter betrayal* as Kaminari uses him as a springboard, throwing him right into the tape that wraps around his torso, pinning his arms to his sides. His hits the ground with an undignified grunt. Annoyance is another emotion he is all too familiar with as Sero leaps over his body as if he is an unimportant casualty of war and *leaves him* tied up on the ground to chase after Kaminari's shrieking form.

His position means that he's staring up at Bakugou's face (who is also ignoring him, Shoto would like to point out). The blonde is wearing a

look Shoto can't identify- he recognizes the amusement, but the soft expression is wholly unfamiliar to him.

"Hey," Kirishima finally comes over.

Not to release Shoto.

No, no, Kirishima steps over Shoto too, because of course he does. Perhaps they haven't met Shoto before because clearly, they've forgotten how long his memory is and how petty he can be. It's all fine.

"You scared us, man," Kirishima says carefully.

Bakugou shrugs, all humor gone from his face.

"I was thinking of making potato buns stuffed with teriyaki," Bakugou says instead of acknowledging Kirishima's words. The worry they'd all experienced as time had ticked by and the slow realization among their class that something was wrong. That Bakugou hadn't come back. "I could probably manage Tokayaki too, if you think you can follow basic instructions."

Kirishima takes Bakugou's half insult and disregard for his concerns as if Bakugou has granted them all with a heartfelt thank you and dance number.

"Just tell me what to do and I'll get it done!"

And then Bakugou *steps over* Shoto, allowing Kirishima to throw his arm over Bakugou's shoulder and the pair *abandon him on the ground*.

"I hate all of you," Shoto intoned darkly.

Midoriya appears out of nowhere, a pair of scissors in hand, and starts to cut away at the tape.

"Except you."

Eijiro notices the new addition as they are changing into their costumes the next time they train.

He projects his movements as he slinks over to Bakugou, smiling widely at the suspicious look on the blonde's face.

"Hey man, you didn't tell me you got a new addition to your costume?" He nudges Bakugou playfully. He sees Midoriya's head tilt their way, listening in to them, turned just enough that Eijiro can see the shine of curiosity and the once over.

"What?" Bakugou grunts, rolling his shoulders, the crack that sounds making Iida wince across the room.

"The bracelet," Eijiro says lightly, pointing to the rather pretty looking ankle bracelet. He'd say it was for aesthetics, but his friend is too practical to wear something with his costume that doesn't have a purpose. Even his mask is meant to further the intimidation factor and to keep his hair out of his eyes as he fights. The bracelet on his ankle looks like it's made of stone. The colors sliding across it making it look like an over-sized mood ring. "What does it do?"

Bakugou frowns at him, pulling out his boots, the heavy, metal reinforced footwear the opposite aesthetic to the pretty item.

"Monitors my emotions, blood pressure, and heart rate for better performance," Bakugou muttered.

"Ohhhhh, so it IS a mood ring," Eijiro breathed in excitement. "That's cool. What made you decide to add it? How does it help?"

Bakugou is silent for too long. Tugging his boots on roughly and tucking the ankle bracelet inside of it with the bottom of his pants. That looks uncomfortable but Eijiro doesn't say as much.

"It helps me in the areas of being a hero I'm weakest at," Bakugou finally says, after the uncomfortable silence becomes awkward in the locker room.

"So your admitting- " Kaminari doesn't have the chance to finish that sentence. Sero elbows him in the side, giving him a glare and Eijiro has never been more thankful because holy shit this is big.

And everyone in the locker room seems to know it because even Mineta doesn't speak up here. Kaminari picks it up a second into his glaring contest with Sero, grimacing and hunkering down at his own locker.

This was not something to joke about.

“Pretty manly,” Eijiro says with a grin, leaning as casually as he can against his own locker. “Maybe I can try one then?” He flexes and waggles his eyebrows, trying to appear as relaxed and supportive as possible.

“It’s not something someone like *you* needs,” Bakugou grouses, tilting his head towards the exit. “You ready?”

“Born ready,” Eijiro promises, walking beside him. “Still, I used to wear a Fitbit all the time when I was training to get into UA. Only stopped because I kept breaking them and my moms were getting annoyed at me for being so absentminded when I activated my quirk. If it’s monitoring your heart rate, then why is it on your ankle? Shouldn’t you wear it on your wrist?”

“It’s an I-island design. Says it can work on your ankle and that way its out of the way of my gauntlets.”

Eijiro hums.

“That’s cool, I didn’t realize you bought any big tech while we were there. I thought you said that stuff is obnoxiously expensive.”

“It is.”

Eijiro laughed.

When they get to the training session its Aizawa watching over them. They’re doing rock climbing today. He glances at Bakugou whose eyes are intently ahead, like always.

“Race you to the top?” Eijiro asks him.

The grin that spreads across the blonde’s face is vicious as much as it is excited.

“He-” Bakugou pauses, his grin faltering. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Bakugou does a weird thing with his face. His lips twitching upwards a little and something that looks like a strained smile taking its place, but not quite. It falls almost as quickly. Frustration coloring his friend’s face.

Eijiro gazes in confusion at the odd stuttering of words the excitement from before falling away so completely. It’s at the tip of his tongue to ask what had caused his friend’s smile to be wiped away so

completely. To ask what was going on in that head of his.

Then Bakugou shoots forward.

It takes Eijiro an embarrassingly long moment to realize that the race has already started, and that Lord Explosion Murder just got a head start on him.

“God damn it.”

Smile

Chapter Summary

In the middle of trying to fix himself, Katsuki has a panic attack.

Mina teaches Bakugou something important.

Chapter 15: Smile

For what's it's worth, Katsuki does take Best Jeanist's advice to practice smiling in the mirror.

He smiles like he normally does, trying to figure out what's wrong with it. 'Aggressive,' people said, 'threatening.' He did show a lot of teeth but... so did Kirishima and everyone loved his smile. 'Like sunshine,' Horn's had said one time in a teasing manner to Kirishima. Katsuki though... Katsuki could remember a photographer for school pictures in elementary who'd flinched when he'd smiled. r

"Half your issue is how much joy you take in fighting. You look vicious all the time. Consider adding a mask to your hero costume. Hiding your face away might just be half your battle taken care of. If the general public and your fellow heroes can't read your emotions then as long as you can keep your mouth shut then you can pull off the mysterious card rather than the crazed lunatic you come across as now. Just something to consider." -A publicist

It's highlighted in green. A suggestion. There were other parts of the letter, but a lot of it was redundant. Repetition of what's already been said about him. Katsuki spends an obnoxious amount of time doodling on sketch paper a few design ideas.

There were benefits to it.

If he designed it to cover his face and put in some smoke and gas filtering mechanism then it would protect him from the backlash of his quirk and the possible negative effects of other people's quirk. He could make that work. He could make that look badass.

Every part of his costume had duel purposes.

Every piece was well thought out. It wasn't like Deku's costume where he'd added fucking bunny ears just to look more like All Might (and fuck yeah he'd recognized that. The nerd was too damn obvious). And what the ever living fuck was point of that circular thing Grape stain wore? For fucks sake his classmates could at least pretend to be practical sometimes.

Katsuki sketched a few designs out.

The filter was always too bulky though. He already had enough bulkiness with his grenade gauntlets. He really couldn't afford to bog himself down more. He could make it metal. Make it look like his kneecaps and shoulder bracers... Katsuki quickly added the sharp edges of metal that were custom to his two pieces. That would really tie in the whole design actual...

His fingers stopped, the tip of the pencil breaking as he realized what it looked like now.

It looked like the muzzle.

The one Midnight forced on his face at the Sport's Festival when he's been screaming to stop as they'd started sending him up.

'No one wants to hear that.'

Katsuki didn't quite make it to the bathroom. Vomit spewed all over the sink, some splashing across the mirror. He remembers seeing her face when he'd woken up. Her eyes had met his and there was a flicker of hesitance there. She recognized even before the stage started to lift that this was wrong. She fucking knew.

'He's been struggling ever since waking up.'

He hears off stage, people talking. Muttering. Gossiping.

'Jesus Christ, he looks like a rapid animal.'

Katsuki turns on the faucet. The water runs but the sound isn't loud enough to drown out the words that slam into him from his own mind. From his memories.

'What a lunatic. Don't they do psych evaluations before letting people in?'

'How does he have so much energy?'

'A bad egg that one. Anyone who attacks a woman like that, you just gotta

know ain't gonna be a good person.'

'It's actually fitting. Don't you think? He's finally where he deserves.'

'Take it off. What is wrong with you people? We treat Villains under arrest better than that.'

'I bet he was voted number one in his middle school for most likely to become a Villain.'

'Don't look.'

His fingers clutch against the ceramic of the sink. It's cold. Smooth. He can feel the tile under his socked feet. Small little squares. He bends down and presses his forehead against his knees as he tries to get his breathing back under control. The air conditioner is on too high, like it always is in his room, to keep the nitroglycerin he produces down to a bare minimum. Katsuki hates the cold so he has to constantly stop himself from grabbing one of his hoodies and making the high AC bill pointless

A small metal ring presses against his forehead. It's sewn to the pocket of his pants. Meant to attach his keys to when he leaves the house, but now it's pretty pointless since he's never going back home.

This is his home now.

He's here at the dorms. Not the stadium. There's not a thousand shouts and whispers hitting him from all sides. His classmates aren't standing off to the side doing nothing to help him. He's not trapped and panicking inside a metal casing.

The lesson sits like a fresh wound on his pad of paper though. The sharp outlines of the mask stand out stark against white emptiness.

No one is coming to help him.

He has to help himself.

The image of Aizawa comes to mind for a split second. Of the squad. His head is too stuck elsewhere though. In a time not so distant. Frighteningly not so distant. Mere months between now and there.

For a moment he's not sure if it's metal or sludge that's the sensation wrapped around his mouth, forcing its way in and down his throat. Wrapping around him so tightly that he can't move his arms. He hears

his hands pop as he tries to get rid of it, but its smothered. There's no oxygen to create a flame.

'Perfect. I like a skinsuit with some fire.'

And off to the side there's fucking people. Heroes.

Doing nothing.

'Stay back or I'll snap his neck.'

And they'd listened.

As Katsuki has fought and pulled and gasped for air. They'd stayed back.

'You've got so much power! I really hit the jackpot. With a quirk like yours under my control I could take All Might down with one punch!'

'It's no good! None of us have the right quirks to stop a Villain like this!'

Katsuki shot up, puking again, gagging on the taste of his lunch coming back up.

'Why aren't the heroes doing anything?'

'Someone should do something!'

'Just a little bit longer kid.'

He'd almost finished. The Villain had almost taken over completely while the heroes had watched. He'd been using his explosions to force out the sludge over and over and over again. Forcefully repelling the thing from his body. It had left his throat raw, having the sludge force its way down only to rip it out again and again. It had taken weeks for it to heal, for his voice not to sound so hoarse anymore. If Katsuki hadn't fought back then he'd have been dead within seconds. The stuff moved so fast and with such power.

Katsuki wouldn't hesitate like that.

Katsuki's quirk would always be the right quirk. He would make it the right quirk. He'd make it so he could handle any situation. He'd train himself to the bone just to make sure he was always the right person for the job. The whole concept of the AP shot was to fight Villains like the Sludge. To be able to cut away at the thing with keeping damage to a minimum. Katsuki adapted to the needs of the job, considered

every angle.

He would never stand by when someone needed to be saved. He wouldn't stand by if there was something wrong going on that he could do something about.

'Pros are always risking their lives! That's the true test of a hero!'

Like All Might.

But he hadn't been talking to Katsuki that day.

He'd been talking to Deku.

As Katsuki was being suffocated to death, All Might had been looking right at Deku, and when he'd punched the Villain, obliterating it, Katsuki had felt the thing ripped out of him in the worst, most painful way. And when he'd woken up... no one had asked him if he was okay. Even as his throat had felt stripped from him. As he still felt as if he was being violated, left with a raw throat and his insides coated in stuff he doesn't want to think about, the heroes had not asked him if he was okay. They'd talked *at* him about how well he'd done. They'd talked *at* him about joining their agency when he graduates. About helping *them*. Chortling among themselves as if they hadn't let him down. As if they hadn't watched him almost die.

And if he had it right...

Then that was the day All Might offered Deku his own quirk.

Katsuki feels lightheaded.

He hasn't been doing this whole breathing thing right. His shallow gasps have been only getting worse despite the grounding technique he taught himself back when his attacks had been getting in the way of his training in middle school. He clutches his side and eyeballs the distance to his bed. He half stumbles, half crawls to it, letting his body curl in on itself as he stares at the wall in front of him.

He's never not come down from a panic attack.

But this time there are black spots in front of his vision and he thinks there's worse places this could have happened. Like in the gym. In front of his classmates. Pretty much any time he's not alone is a really bad time but here... here at least there's no one to witness this. He's alone at least, and managed to make it to his bed, there are worse

places...

Katsuki doesn't fight the black spots.

Instead, he closes his eyes and lets himself drift off. His body will regulate his breathing naturally after his mind shuts down. That's how it works.

This is fine.

A fake smile is better than a muzzle, Katsuki thinks to himself the next day.

This is something he has to fix about himself. Because he doesn't think he can handle a mask. Maybe later on. When he's gotten his shit together and all these fucking panic attacks calm their tits and leave him be.

Today he tries in the reflection of his sliding glass doors. Something that's not the bathroom mirror. He can't seem to glance in the direction of the bathroom mirror without thinking about the drawing he'd made. He needs to burn it. He will when he next ventures over there, but not now.

Now Katsuki has to fix this problem of his.

Katsuki smiles at the transparent reflection. It's sharp and toothy. Wide.

Aggressive.

Best Jeanist had said.

Savage.

Many of the letters noted.

Scary, he knows, because there were times he's thrown a triumphant smile Deku's way throughout their years in school when he slides past the bastard in academics. And Deku always flinched back. Shrinking in on himself.

Katsuki hates that.

When the shitty nerd hits the top spot in their class the cheeky bastard always shoots Katsuki this small, pleased, taunting smile. *'Better luck next time,'* the smile says. Those big green eyes sparking with a *'gotcha'* sort of look.

Deku is just as competitive as Katsuki and fuck anyone who says otherwise.

Deku's also just really god damn timid.

It wasn't fair that the pair of them could do *the exact same thing to each other*. But it garnered different reactions. It was seen differently.

Katsuki let the smile drop.

He tried again, no teeth this time. It still looked wrong though. And Kirishima smiled with his teeth even though they were sharp and pointed and he'd never seen anyone be intimidated or scared of Kirishima.

Katsuki bit his knuckle as he tried to figure out what...

Maybe his face just wasn't meant for smiling, but that seemed unlikely. He was a biological carbon copy of his mother. His mom had a great smile. A model's smile. Everyone said so.

He plopped into his computer chair and then Katsuki typed in his mother's name and her agency into his laptop. He signed into her login account for the Business. Her latest photo shoot popped up. The one that she and the old man had left for the day after Katsuki moved into the dorms.

These were the photos that wouldn't show up in magazine's or blogs for another few months. The Fall Season showcase they would be featuring. His dad's newest designs at the forefront of a large city. This one of Venice, Italy. Old Buildings and bridges, whites and oranges and reds, offset by a few bright blue rivers in the background. It was a good choice for Autumn. The deep maroons and emerald clothing line the Hag was wearing looked even more dazzling against the brighter landscape.

Katsuki clicked through until he found a picture of her smiling.

It was an easy smile.

No teeth.

Not too wide and only one side of her mouth tugging upward. The wrongness of his own smile felt harsher now. His mother stood, relaxed, gazing straight into the camera. There was no anger to be seen. No glower or animosity. The bright red eyes seemed to glitter almost, glowing in the near dusk lighting.

Katsuki wheeled the chair to the window, trying it out.

It went too wide almost instantly.

A bit of teeth showing through and his eyes narrowing.

He forces his eyes wider. He tried to make it small, to smooth it out, but his face only looked constipated with the effort. He let it drop. Twitched his lips the smallest bit, until it was barely a movement of his mouth.

What was there wasn't really a smile. And the wider his eyes were the more of a lunatic he looked like. Unlike fucking Deku whose weird tear duct mutation had the added effect of unnaturally big fucking eyes that everyone seemed to find endearing. His was...

Not even a ghost of a smile.

He felt the urge to slam his head against his desk.

This should be fucking *easy*. This should be the easiest problem to fix about himself. This should be a none issue.

His alarm went off to head out to train.

He pushed off of the window with a twist, the chair turning on its wheels right in front of his desk. He closed out of the tabs, shutting his laptop closed in the same motion as he stood up, hooking his foot under the seat and pushing it under the desk even as he reached for his door and opened it.

Crap.

Maybe he'd just try not to smile at all.

Mina needs to find Bakugou asap.

She tugs at her clothes and frowns at her hair as she grabs her bag and slings it over her shoulder. Uraraka had told her she'd looked hot and Hagakure had said she was jealous and as much as she loved her girls, she didn't trust them.

She took the stairs three at a time, banging into the entranceway as she shot through the door.

"No running in the halls, Ashido!" Iida's voice snapped.

"Ai, ai!" Mina saluted, slowing down and bowing apologetically to the school rep.

Right up until she went around the corner. Then she was off again. She made it to Bakugou's door, knocking to the beat of some half-remembered song she'd been listening to this morning.

"Bakubabe! I need your help!"

She still remembered the first time she'd been about to leave the dorms to hang with a few friends on campus. There was a third year boy in the Heroics class she had an eye on and that she wanted to look cute when they 'casually walked by.'

Bakugou had taken one look at her on his way out for one of his workout jogs and cursed. Marching up to her and turning her around. He'd unlaced the back of her shirt with one smooth movement and she'd been too shocked, too startled to say anything. And then he'd started to lace it back up.

"The fuck were you thinking?" he hissed. "You look like you got into a fucking fight with your god damn clothes."

"I..."

"No, I don't even want to hear it. You'll probably make my ears bleed."

He'd turned her around, looking her up and down and tscking.

"If you're gonna wear gaudy animal print that clashes with your skin tone like this, the least you can do is show some fucking classiness with *how* you wear it."

Bakugou adjusted her neckline, tightening the tie at the back of her neck and tilting her head this way and that

“Jesus Christ. You can’t wear silver with cheetah print. OI! PONYTAIL!”

Momo jumped a foot in the air, turning towards them.

“Yes, Bakugou?” The exasperation in Momo’s voice is... sort of, 100% hilarious.

“I need classy gold eyeshadow and black eyeliner.” Bakugou tilted her head roughly, red eyes intent as he took in her face with a thoughtful frown. “Black eyeshadow too. Can you make a foundation in her skin tone?”

Momo approached, a sparkle in her eye as she *took* Mina’s chin from Bakugou’s hand, only a little more gentle. She wants to pout at them.

“Of course, I can. What about earrings?” Momo asked.

Bakugou shook his head.

“We need to tone down the gaudiness, not enhance it. But if you can make a black hat with a cheetah print stripe that would raise the level a lot. A fisherman’s top, preferably, room for her horns, obviously, no need to hide her best feature.”

Mina, finally over her shock, beamed.

“Thanks, Blasty! But I thought you loved my eyes,” she batted her eyes teasingly.

Bakugou didn’t miss a beat.

“I said your horns were your best, not the only good feature. I don’t want to see any of this half-baked shit. You’re better than that. Now hold still.”

That had been several weeks ago. Back when Bakugou claimed it was the Exam’s that kept him busy and away from their squad time. Now that the Provisional License Exam had come and gone and Bakugou hadn’t passed, it seemed like he was avoiding hanging with them more.

He’d taken failing the exams to a level that scared her.

She knocked on Bakugou’s door again, knowing he wasn’t the fastest riser when woken. Early to bed and late to rise. Bakugou took beauty sleep, just like everything else, up to the next level. Not that anyone

really blamed him.

With the way that he always seemed to be overworking himself... it was no surprise that he conked out like that every night. Worrying, definitely, but not surprising. No noise came from the door. Not even the shuffling of a body.

Instead, Kirishima's door popped open. Red hair in a disarray and mushed up from sleep so badly that it was almost as tall as when he gelled it. Tired eyes eyed her in what was quite possibly the closest Mina had ever seen him to 'grumpy.'

"Sorry, Kiri! Didn't mean to wake you. Do you...?"

"Training," Kirishima deadpanned, the disapproval clear in his voice. "Again. I tried to stop him this morning, but he was set on it. Again."

Mina bit her lip.

"He seemed to take losing to Mirio pretty hard," she whispered. "Even though he outlasted all of us. Plua, you know," she shrugged. "The exams and he always seems so depressed when he comes back from the remedial classes. I think its all stacking up on him."

"He treats himself like he should already be at a Pro level," Kirishima muttered, a bite of anger in his voice. "Like if he isn't then he doesn't deserve to relax. It's not manly."

"Should we tell Sensei?" Mina asked. "I hate to go behind his back like this, but he isn't talking to us."

"Aizawa is *already* making him spend half an hour out in the common room each night. And Bakugou's treating it like a punishment. He hasn't been doing anything but working since we moved into the dorms," Kirishima's voice was frayed and Mina felt the last of her good mood fall away.

"Do you know what he's working on right now?" Mina asked.

Kirishima pulled his hand through his hair and... oh, that's how it got so bad. His fingers were half hardened as he brushed his hair back, making the normally soft locks curl and frizz outwards from having what was basically oil covered rock going through it.

"He said he was going to be working on his aerial combat today so I don't know where he would do that, but if you go outside and wait,

you'll probably be able to see him at some point in the air and know what direction to head in."

"He could be at the USJ then?" Mina suggested.

"No. Class 2B has it rented out for the whole weekend. Tetsutetsu texted me complaining about it because he said Vlad had wanted to use the building for an exercise and they'd had to move to Ground Beta instead."

Her frazzled friend crossed his arms and Mina couldn't take it anymore. She stepped forward and threw her arms around his neck, taking in his familiar scent; a mix of jasmine and too much baby powder he used to help with his too dry skin. Kirishima instinctively hugged her back. His large arms wrapping around her smaller frame in something that was wholly protective and safe. She always felt like a building could come down on her in these arms and she'd still be perfectly fine.

He always wrapped her around the back of her shoulders. So different to the way Kaminari would snake his hands around her waist and snuggle into the crook of her neck when they hugged. Kaminari's were always short bursts with his natural static electricity running along her skin, waking her up and making her giggle.

So different to Sero's lanky frame wrapping his arms under her armpits and lifting her off her feet. Swinging her around and then laying his head on top of hers, forcing Mina under his chin. Always asking her if she needed anything and checking in on her, the feel of his mouth moving on top of her head as they remained locked in an embrace.

And Bakugou...

Stiff. Unmoving. Tensed to the point that it felt like a hot rock underneath her. Bakugou who didn't know how to give or receive hugs. Who'd tell her to get off him but who would never, ever push her off. Seemed afraid to even touch her. Whose eyes were frantic even as his mouth was frowning down at her. Who smelled like a hot caramel apple, cinnamon and spices, and a furnace of heat.

The thought of Bakugou and hugs makes her squeeze Kirishima harder. Makes her want to hold on for longer. Her plans for the day fall away and she finds herself coming up with new plans.

"I'll find our Blasty and talk to him, okay?" Mina tells the crook of

Kirishima's neck.

Kirishima makes a noise in his throat, a rumbling sound that she feels from her position.

"I should..."

"Stay here." She doesn't allow him to argue with her. "I'm perfectly capable of checking in on him. You're not his only friend, Kiri. He isn't your responsibility. He's our *friend*. I know you're worried. I'm worried. No one can keep this kind of behavior up. Not even Bakugou."

She pulls away and pats his cheek.

Kirishima deflated.

"Okay," he said in the saddest of tones. His nose scrunching up and his mouth pulling into a 10/10 pout. "Okay. I trust you."

She grinned.

"Good."

Mina is used to seeing Kirishima throw himself out of skyscraper windows to practice his hardening. She's used to seeing Sero weave through the air with his tape like the Japanese Spiderman he is. She's flown above wreckages with Uraraka's quirk defying gravity upon her.

It's still hard to watch Bakugou's aerial practice.

He gets too close to the ground before he changes direction.

He shoots down too fast to be safe.

He does too many things while in the air; AP shots, blasts, flash bombs, flips- to the point that Bakugou doesn't seem to be even paying attention to how close the unforgiving forest floor is.

It makes her heart stutter and leap.

She grits her teeth and smiles, waving him over with too much enthusiasm. It takes him way too long to notice her. Probably in his own headspace again, which seems to be happening more and more

lately, and doesn't really seem to be a good place.

He blasts towards her, flipping backward as he stops igniting his nitroglycerin ten feet above the ground, landing crouched. He's absolutely covered in sweat. It even drips from his hair and Mina realizes that she hadn't asked Kiri *when* Bakugou had left this morning. Trails of smoke still smart from his palms as he stands, one hand cocked on his wrist and breathing hard, but not labored.

He's in his school uniform.

It's dirty but in pristine condition. No rips. No string unraveled on the cuffs. No burn or scorch marks. Just dirty. And Mina has no words for how bewildering that is. Even Iida with all of his care has damage to the bottom of his pants all the time.

"What are you doing here, Horns?" Bakugou demands, not unkindly or as a dismissal, though she would have taken it for that at the start of the year. The brisk, to the point way of speaking never failing to rile up those who don't know him.

She twirls, showing off the gym uniform she changed into before she left, before bowing.

"Kiri said you were training so I figured this was my best opportunity to beat you in a spar since you're all tuckered out," Mina winked at him, plastering a grin on her face that didn't feel good to wear.

But Bakugou matched her grin with his own.

The large familiar smile of teeth bright and full. A spark of fire that never failed to make her want to try her hardest at whatever elicited that look from him.

And then it flickered.

Like a wildfire doused to embers, it wobbled for a long moment and fell.

Then he tried to smile again but it was a crooked thing. It looked wrong on him and Mina felt herself shrinking back from it, her own easy smile falling away.

"What's wrong?" She asked, stepping towards him.

The odd crooked smile fell away altogether, leaving his face blank.

“Nothing,” he lied, turning away from her and stretching. “You want to spar here or at one of the gyms?”

She looked around at the spot he’d chosen. A clearing surrounded by trees. Almost like a natural arena. It dipped downwards a bit. Hard packed earth beneath her feet. Pockets of holes about the place too that had been filled in.

“Did you make this place?” She asked in exasperation.

The holes looked a little too much like the remnants of explosions. The arena a little too much like an arena. The earth packed a little too evenly over the roots.

Bakugou shrugged.

Which was a yes.

She stretched herself, eyeing the thick layer of nitro along his whole body. As much as her trash talk was true, that Bakugou was tired from his workout, it was also a fact that the longer Bakugou was fighting the more of an advantage he had.

“I need to work on my defensive hand to hand,” Mina said casually. “Sensei says I’m light on my feet and focusing on my ability to fight outside of my quirk would give me an advantage over my opponents.”

Bakugou sparked off, nodding his ascent.

He falls into a fighting stance as if its his most comfortable position. A stray thought that makes her snigger. Which doesn’t fail to elicit an eye roll from the blonde and a tilt of his head that says: ‘take this seriously or we’re done.’

She fights the sound and falls into her own, much less graceful defensive stance. It’s not a bad stance, not by any means, but Aizawa Sensei says her body wants to fall into a dancer’s stance. And while that works well to incorporate into her fighting style, it leaves her off balance at the start because her body goes for the dance and her mind goes for the defensive fighting style so she ends up with something in the middle and off balance for both.

The silent start of their spar has Bakugou taking advantage of that.

Normally Bakugou is, oddly enough, a defensive fighter. Preferring to wait out his opponent to observe their quirk. To analyze their

strategy. The moment he feels he knows what to expect, he goes in for the kill like a Viper.

Unfortunately for Mina... Bakugou already knows her style and moves.

He moves in close, avoiding her spray of acid with a twist that is obnoxiously tight and controlled. She only barely dodges the uppercut. Leaps above the sweep he attempts.

But now she's off balance.

Her naturally fast reflexes and reaction time working against her as she's in the air and he's underneath her. He smirks. She grimaces. His legs shoot up in a backflip, stupid powerful thighs winding around her waist to bring her down.

They both hit the ground. Mina twists, popping her arm out of the socket to squirrel her way out of his hold. She rolls, coming up in a crouch that she's seen him do a hundred times before at this point, and sticks her tongue out at him.

"Really?" he deadpans.

Mina tenses as she pops her arm back into place, trying for a casual shrug to show how unaffected she is, only to grimace at the sharp twinge of pain that strikes her.

"Whatcha gonna do about it, bitch?" She dances away. "Besides... be kinda hypocritical of you to get pissy about my move when you did something way more cringey just yesterday."

"Better than losing immediately, like you extras."

"Is it though?" Mina asked, trying to keep her voice light and casual. "Breaking your ankle for a few extra seconds in a fight does not seem like..."

She flipped backward, dodging Bakugou's swipe. Grabbing him by the arm and attempting to flip him. He turned inwards though before crouching and Mina found her world spinning rapidly as her back hit the ground.

Bakugou bent down and touched her arm.

"If you're going to use a person's arm as leverage to flip them, you

need to make sure you're using the full weight of your back. You need to get your shoulder *under* my armpit before you flip me," Bakugou instructed.

"But Midoriya pulled you over his shoulder when he did it," Mina whined. She still let Bakugou pull her up though, dusting herself off.

"Deku's a crazy bast..." Bakugou faltered, flinching so hard that his whole body twitched with the movement. Mina rushed forward, steadying him. Bakugou took a deep breath and started again. "Don't compare yourself to what Deku tries to pull every other week. He's got no common sense. He tries to copy me when my moves are made for *my work out routine* and no one else's."

"Blasty..."

"My back and my shoulders are my core strength areas which is why I get to do an over the shoulder grab, but that's not going to work for fighters like you."

"Bakugou..."

"You grabbed my arm the wrong way too..."

"STOP!"

Bakugou paused, those wine-red eyes boring into her. Telling her not to ask. To leave it be. To drop it.

"*What* was that?!" Mina demanded. "Are you hurt? Did you get hurt and you're not telling me?"

She looked him up and down, but outside of being covered in dust and a bit of grime, he looked fine.

"Just a muscle cramp," Bakugou told her, shoving his hands in his pockets. "It happens."

Mina's lips pressed together.

"Blasty, that is not what that was."

Bakugou's eyebrows raised in a challenge.

"Yeah? Then enlighten me. What do you think it was?"

She searched his face, but Bakugou's poker face was harder to read

than Kaminari's short-circuited intermission. It was frustrating. Because even though she knew it wasn't what it claimed to be, she didn't know what it *could be*.

She wasn't Midoriya or Iida or Momo or Bakugou. She wasn't widely knowledgeable and while she wasn't failing at school, she wasn't exactly a model student. She was good enough at academics to be passing in an elite school like UA and that had always been more than satisfying for her.

She was amazing at the practical stuff.

She was fantastic at the people stuff.

She wasn't the best at strategizing, but she knew how to follow directions and they'd been talking. She and Kirishima and Kaminari and Sero... About forming their own Hero Agency together after Graduation.

There was one thing missing though.

Someone missing.

Bakugou was deflecting. Using Mina's own lack of knowledge against her. Her weakness. Because Katsuki Bakugou was great at strategy even if he was terrible with people. Bakugou was an amazing teacher, able to change his method according to each person's needs. But terrible at accepting help himself. He was a great leader, but following orders was practically against his very nature. Bakugou could read body language and expressions like nobody's business, but interpreting words was beyond him.

Mina didn't have the knowledge to analyze what was going on, but she was great with people.

She took a breath, opening her eyes and hoping the emotions Bakugou couldn't seem to accept in her words could be seen in her eyes.

"Blasty... can I hug you? I really need a hug."

Bakugou opened and closed his mouth, searching her eyes for a long moment, looking confused and tense.

Then he shrugged.

"Do what you want."

She hugged the tense body. Pressing her face into his chest, feeling how damp and dirty he was from being out here for hours. He was right. The thickest part of Bakugou was his back and shoulder muscles. His waist, hips, and legs were a touch smaller than her own. Mina had spent years practicing moving on her acid, her leg strength her most powerful tool in a fight. He was like a furnace against her. Heat seeming to thrum along his body in waves. If it rained right now, she wondered if steam would rise from his skin.

Bakugou didn't hug her back.

She wondered, not for the first time, if he even knew he was supposed to. If he knew how to wrap his arms around her own smaller shoulders and squeeze. If he knew he could lean against her rather than taking all of her weight or put his head on top of hers. If he knew he was allowed to move at all.

Time to test that.

"Blasty?"

"Yeah, Horns?"

"Hug me back."

The tense body became tenser. A long silence broken only by the breeze of a strong wind and two chipmunks arguing in a tree far off. Eventually, though she felt Bakugou adjust a bit, his hands coming up and... gingerly touching the top of her shoulders. No weight at all. His fingers were barely leaning against her, more hovering than anything else. As if he was afraid to initiate contact in any way.

She squeezed him harder.

"You can't break me Blasty, I'm not some delicate wallflower," she told him. "Hold onto me like I'm falling out of an air balloon and you're the only thing that's keeping me from plummeting to my death."

The shoulder's lowered.

His hands finally moved to the small of her back. Wrapping around her tightly around the waist. He didn't let his head touch hers, but he did lift it so that she fell deeper against his chest as he raised his collar bone up rather than looking down at her like he didn't know what to do. His hunched shoulders straightened a bit for a better grip.

“Is this... okay?” The utterly vulnerable tone caught Mina off guard, and she felt her heart break a little.

“One of the best hugs I’ve ever gotten, Blasty.”

Secrets and Advice

Chapter Summary

Izuku's new internship proves to be difficult and heart breaking.

All Might is more involved (but dadmight isn't quite here yet)

Chapter Notes

I'm not DEAAAAAAAAAD. Dear lord in writing I beseech thee forgiveness for my time away from you my darling.

On a more serious note: Real life sucks ass right now. I'm about to do a 11:30 pm- 1:00pm shift. Give me strength. Shenanigans and shit has been happening in my life and dealing with it hasn't been fun but I hope yall are having a good Thanksgiving! The past 5 weeks have been... terrible. Fucking terrible.

Please throw reviews at me; good, bad, neutral, I don't care. I need some fun critiques to keep me going and to cheer me up. Tell me what you love and hate about this chapter. As you guys know by now Izuku is the hardest character for me to write and I spent forever trying to get him right. Most of this was already written when shit went down for me hard core and I ended up going on a five week unexpected hiatus of hell.

Chapter 16: Secrets and Advice

Izuku buzzed with excitement. Nighteye had taken him on for the internships. He hadn't met him yet, but he would be soon. All Might's old sidekick was one of very few in hero society to be able to call himself that.

It felt as if each time Izuku met someone from All Might's life, he learned more about his mentor. About the world he'd existed in for so long. The people who'd influenced and helped him all of these years.

Gran Torino and the horror stories of being trained by the man in his youth. The odd, quirky but strangely affective lessons he gave to Izuku. The difference between how the old man had handled his training and All Might's training and what that said about him as a user of One For All.

The Detective, All Might's best friend, so warm and friendly. Which gave light to All Might's insistence that there were more ways to do good than just be a Hero. His first suggestion of the police. His mentor had been thinking of his friend then, most likely, and hadn't meant to discourage Izuku. Reluctant as he was to find fault in his mentor, there was little defense he could give to the panicked actions his mentor always pulled when he was about to lose his Hero form. And his advice on the roof had been less than thought out even if sincere.

David and Melissa Shield, the top Hero Support tech Wizzes, quirkless like Izuku used to be. Like All Might used to be. Yet able to change the world all on their own, with their minds and hearts. He wonders sometimes, in the dead of night, if that would have been the job he'd tried for if he hadn't been given One For All. If he'd failed the entrance exam because he'd attempted it with no quirk.

Or if he would have been like Shinsou, ending up in the General Studies program, becoming bitter but determined. Or if he would have tried to get into the Hero schools somewhere else, where exams were less reliant on quirks.

He tried not to ask too many 'what if' questions, knowing that he had a tendency to launch himself face first down a spiraling hole of self-questioning and panic.

And now Nighteye.

Notebook # 10 sits in the palm of his hand. All the information he'd ever written about All Might's sidekick is here with references to articles and battles. He's been pouring over it for a while, though now he's dressed in his gym clothes.

All Might wanted him to work on his transition from hand to foot combat. The man said that he paused too long in the middle of a spar as if he was shifting gears when he moved from using his punches to using his kicks.

Speaking of his mentor...

"Young Midoriya! How are you?"

Izuku smiled as the man offered him a meat bun, still steaming. A cup of coffee in his other hand. He could smell the heavy mint from here. Knowing his teacher, there were probably marshmallows in it too. All Might liked to make hot cocoas with coffee in it rather than taking his

coffee with anything.

Maybe he could get Kacchan to make All Might one of his famous hot cocoas.

The thought sobered him up, shriveling all of his good thoughts for the day.

"I'm good. Glad to see you out of the rest of those bandages," Izuku told him as the man stood, his withered form as familiar to Izuku (if not more so) than his Hero form. He knows his classmates are still getting used to it though. The way Uraraka tended to pause when he entered the room but quickly rushed to sound casual. The way Iida kept telling All Might to be careful and to take care of himself. The intense way his classmates seemed to keep one eye out for the man when they were training.

Kacchan, especially, looks like a ghost every time he sees All Might.

Izuku isn't sure how to react to it. The defensive way Kacchan seems to hold himself now in All Might's presence. The way that he's been avoiding both him and his mentor like the plague. Kacchan has always tried to keep his distance, but now it's more than that. He is actively trying to get away from him rather than the careful, deliberate ten or so feet he tries to maintain.

It's different and new and Izuku has the odd desire to throw a punch Kacchan's way just to get something going rather than this tense limbo. His thoughts are torn away as he sees the gesture to come closer from big hands and an emaciated wrist.

All Might smiles at him, patting his head with the hand holding his bag of meat buns.

"Yes, I am thoroughly happy to not have to see Chiyo every day. Almost as much as she's glad not to see me. She informed me that now that I am officially retired that if I get hurt I'm just going to have to suck it up because I will have no one to blame but myself."

The man laughed, an edge of fear lacing his voice that had Izuku smiling into his hand. Chiyo wouldn't leave All Might alone with his injuries if it was truly serious. Though she would be peeved.

"Looks like you'll just have to rely on us from now on then," Izuku said firmly, giving Toshinori a wide, stern smile. He felt his lips twitch in amusement though, giving him away. The man laughed, loud and

hearty this time, more genuine.

“Indeed, I will.” Large hands gestured towards the gym. “Shall we? I am pleased to be resuming my teaching duties properly after all this time.”

Izuku beamed, striding ahead of his teacher and opening the door. Toshinori marched past him, and into the building where they were to meet Izuku’s classmates for training today.

Izuku doesn’t miss the way Kacchan keeps his eyes downcast throughout the lesson. The way All Might’s voice becomes strained. He can see the way the man glances at Izuku... as if asking ‘what should I do?’ As if Izuku has ever known what the proper thing to do is when it comes to his childhood friend.

Before the exercise really gets going, his mentor clears his throat.

“Young Bakugou, might I speak with you for a moment?” Toshinori asks.

Though from the way Kacchan’s shoulders hunch down, it seems like the other isn’t taking it as a request.

Everyone is dismissed, but Izuku can’t help but linger. All Might is waving his arms and speaking passionately, but Kacchan keeps his gaze off in the distance, on their classmates. Anywhere but on the Symbol of Peace.

The man goes to touch Kacchan’s shoulder but Kacchan takes a step back. Flinching so violently that All Might copies him a second later. He can’t hear what their saying, but his mentor looks subdued now as he speaks. Quiet. Concern lining his features.

“Deku,” the quiet, gentle voice does not belong to his childhood friend. He looks over to see Uraraka watching him sadly. Her hands are folded behind her back as she’s watching him. Eyes round and knowing. “I know you want to help, but its between them.”

Izuku frowns.

He knows.

He *knows*.

It’s just... Despite what Kacchan says... Kacchan had never abandoned

him. They'd grown up together and yeah, Kacchan had been a dick, but they'd both stayed close. Fighting in academics for the top spot. Feeding a one-legged duck. Family get togethers.

Every major event in their lives they'd done together.

It was Kacchan who protected him from Kirigiri during the USJ. Kacchan who'd opted to put himself between All Might and the gate so they could pass the exam. Kacchan who saved Uraraka from attacks on I-Island. Kacchan who had been next to him as they'd watched All Might's last stand.

Kacchan had always been in his life.

Even when neither of them wanted that to be the case.

He felt a small hand wrap around his fingers. Uraraka was looking at him earnestly. He nodded. It wasn't... it wasn't his place. He couldn't force Kacchan to let him in. At the gentle tug, he followed Uraraka onto the exercise field.

Large red eyes feature in his nightmares every night.

The little girl reaching out for him. Being pulled into a dark abyss as Izuku fails over and over and over. It feels like he's lost Kacchan again. Only it's not happily resolved in a few day's time because this time there's no Momo with a tracker. Eri is not Kacchan. She's just a little girl. She can't fight off six villains at once or escape from them. She can't just say 'fuck off' like Kacchan to a Villain.

All Might wouldn't have hesitated to do the right thing. Kacchan wouldn't have hesitated to do the right thing. If they'd had Eri in their arms they would have kept her in their arms. They'd have found a way to kick Overhaul's ass, ensure the man was arrested even as Eri was taken to safety.

Izuku felt like a fraud.

He'd prided himself on always standing up for what was right even at great cost to himself but here... at something so simple, he'd messed up.

Izuku stumbled downstairs as the nightmare lingered in his mind's eye. He needed a distraction and he'd only just remembered to grab his schoolwork before his feet led him down the stairs. He settled on the couch, the lumpy piece of furniture was already showing its wornness from his classmate's abuse.

There were a number of assignments this past week he'd fallen behind on since starting as an intern at Nighteye's agency. It was hard to focus on anything with his mess up hanging over his head and the nightmares disrupting his sleep.

It was well past midnight when it happened.

Izuku twitched as he heard the sound of a kitchen cabinet slam. He'd thought he'd been alone, studying up on recommended material from Sir Nighteye, so he hadn't been 'snuck up on.' He still felt that crawling feeling of anxiety.

It was just one of his classmates, no need for paranoid behavior.

Izuku turned back to his books but stopped at the sound of violent muttering. He winced instinctively, but couldn't help the fond smile that twisted his lips. It was good to hear Kacchan up and moving again. Seeing him so passive had left a knot of nerves in his stomach large enough that it had felt as if it were taking up the entirety of the space below his chest. Made him question things he'd held firm to for years.

He heard the rice cooker turn on and listened as Kacchan measured water out and messed with the giant white rice bag in the kitchens. Small items began to clink onto the countertops and Izuku would put money on Cujuun, black pepper, and chili pepper being the central spices Kacchan was pulling down. There was a tired grunt and the sound of a kettle being put on. Probably black tea. A yawn that cracked the other's jaw. Definitely black tea.

"Could you pour me a cup too?" Izuku called out.

A small clatter of glass against metal told him he'd startled Kacchan. He grinned, hiding it behind his textbook. A vicious series of words followed. Inventive threats and the small 'popping' noise of Kacchan's quirk shooting off tiny explosions of frustration.

He remembered when Kacchan first got his quirk, four years old and no control at all, any time he was upset or angry or even excited, the little pops would shoot off. Setting things on fire. Damaging things. It

got him scolded by teachers and yelled at by Auntie Mitsuki. Which never deterred Kacchan. The ash blonde just hunkered down and worked for hours on his quirk, until his hands were blistered and bloody every day. Beyond the point of tears, until he curled up on the ground and fell asleep, in the grass.

Determined, always, to be the best and to show he could do anything.

It was that part that Izuku admired so much. The drive Kacchan had to push beyond his limits, to keep going even when everyone told him to stop. Kacchan had been forced to have his hands bandaged for weeks at a time because he wouldn't listen to the adults about how control would come with age. He didn't need to hurt himself to have it done now. Kacchan just needed to be patient.

Kacchan wouldn't listen though.

And because of that Kacchan had possessed amazing control of his quirk by the time they were six. All the adults oohed and awed and told Kacchan how *talented* he was, how *naturally gifted* he was. And Kacchan would scoff at them, as if they were the children, and tell them it wasn't talent, he'd earned it.

Which he had.

Izuku admired him for that. It was what had made him believe that if he just worked hard enough, tried hard enough, that he could be a hero too. Kacchan always tried to ruthlessly put that idea down with his words, but his actions always spoke so much louder.

A teacup clinked on the table. He didn't need to sip it to know Kacchan had put three sugar cubes and a touch of milk in it for him. In all the years they'd been distant it was just one of those things the other never forgot.

The blonde sat on a chair as far away from him as possible while still remaining in the living room. Izuku rolled his eyes as he picked up his tea, setting his papers down for the moment.

Oolong.

Huh.

He fiddled with his teacup, running his thumb over the lip.

"If there was someone who needed help," Izuku asked quietly into the

air, “but Best Jeanist told you that helping them later would help take down the thing that put that person in danger in the first place... would you wait?”

There was dead silence for a long moment, only broken by the shuffling of feet. Izuku was tempted to look up and at Kacchan but he knew that was a sure-fire way of not getting an answer.

“Just because someone has good intentions doesn’t mean that the results are good,” Kacchan spoke slowly. “Letting something bad happen for the sake of an unguaranteed tomorrow just means you’ve allowed something bad to happen today. If there’s one thing you’ve gotta have learned by now it’s that plans don’t ever go to plan.”

He looked up then, meeting wine-red eyes that looked more tired than even Izuku felt. He mulled over the words in his head and slowly nodded.

“I think I messed up,” Izuku told him.

“Then fix it,” was the stern reply.

As if it was that simple.

“What if I can’t?” Izuku demanded. “What if...”

“Break it down, nerd,” Kacchan snapped. “What’s the first thing you have to do?”

Izuku stared down at the tea, a small leaf floating on the top as steam wafted against his chin, the heat sliding along his cheek.

“I have to find her,” Izuku told the tea.

“Do it the right way then,” Kacchan spoke, his voice as harsh as ever. “When you find her, don’t overthink it. Don’t hesitate.”

He nodded curtly, feeling an odd sense of relief. He’d known what he needed to do. What he wanted to do. But hearing Kacchan confirm his own thoughts felt like validation. He made him feel more sure of himself.

If only he could help Kacchan.,.

“Why...” Izuku hesitated. “Why have you been avoiding All Might?”

Dead silence sat between them. Their rare moment of peace smashed

into a million little shards that now sat between them like a mine field. As much as Izuku sought after that peace, he sure as hell was good at ruining it.

“Don’t ask dumb questions,” Kacchan hissed, his voice just above a whisper, lurching to his feet. Tea spilled over the lip, but the blonde hardly noticed. “Just make sure you don’t waste that power he gave you.”

Izuku felt his blood run cold.

“When did you...” he stuttered, standing himself.

Kacchan scoffed.

“Don’t practically tell me the answers and then act surprised that I figured it out. And don’t go blabbering about stuff that’s obviously supposed to be a secret, especially a secret that’s not entirely your own,” Kacchan scolded him. “And don’t go thinking I’m like you. I won’t tell anyone.”

Kacchan turned and started marching out of the room, but Izuku wouldn’t let him. Not after an admission like that.

“Wait! Let’s talk about this! Is this why you’ve been avoiding us?”

“Do you really want to have this conversation in the middle of the dorms, you nerd?” Kacchan hissed back, glaring at him. “Think before you open your mouth.”

His jaw clicked shut.

“You can’t just do that...” Izuku hissed, trying to be quiet as well.

“Kacchan, I don’t know what’s gotten into your head lately but...”

The elevator button was stabbed rather aggressively.

“Don’t get in.”

Izuku let out an aggravated huff, watching in annoyance as Kacchan leaped into the elevator and glared at him as the doors closed between them.

“Thanks for the chat, Kacchan, I’m so glad we could clear things up,” Izuku muttered under his breath.

He didn't doubt for even a second that All Might's secrets were safe with the other though. That Izuku's secrets were safe.

Izuku had sat quietly at the meeting alongside Tsuyu, Kirishima, and Uraraka about Overhaul. Aizawa's presence is consoling. Nighteyes condemning. At the back of his mind are Kacchan's words though.

"Then fix it."

He knows it's not that simple.

But...

But Kacchan had always been one of his main sources of inspiration. There was a reason why even though they didn't get along that they always ended up pushing each other towards their next goal rather crashing and burning. Whether that was a spelling bee or an exam or a in the case of UA- a fight.

"And when we analyzed it we found something that made me sick to my stomach," Fatgum had explained to them. *"We found human blood and cells."*

"We're wondering if this Chisake bastard is turning his daughter's body into bullets and selling them on the black market," the Lock Hero had told them, disgust in his voice as he dropped the ax over their throats.

The words were running wild in his head, scratching at his membrane like an animal slowly suffocating to death and intent on escape.

"I still don't trust you." Aizawa had told him. *"Unfortunately, I'm positive if I try to stop you now, you'll do something reckless like try to take things into your own hands. So, I'll watch you. If you're going to see this through, then you gotta do it the right way. Use your head! Hear me? Problem child."*

The right way.

Kacchan had said something similar though the advice felt polar opposite. 'Use your head,' Eraser had said. 'Don't hesitate,' Kacchan had told him, 'don't overthink it.' His body hesitated but his mind overthought things and his heart... his heart always felt as if it was

caught between doing what was expected of him and what he felt was the right thing to do.

“Are you ready?”

Iida's voice nearly gave him a heart attack.

Izuku jerked so hard around that he almost tripped over his own feet. A strong arm reaching forward and steadying him.

“My goodness,” Iida laughed. “Sorry about that, Midoriya, I did not mean to surprise you.”

“It's fine,” he was quick to assure.

They were getting ready for hero practice this afternoon. He'd lost track of himself and his thoughts while changing into his hero costume and it seemed that he and Iida were the only ones left in the locker room.

“You need to get your head in the game, Midoriya, I don't want you getting hurt because you aren't fully with us,” Iida reprimanded him, though gently.

“Sorry, sorry,” he mumbled, “you're right. It's just...”

“I know you are not allowed to speak about your case,” Iida said slowly. “But I am hear if you would like to vent. I can always listen to classical music and pretend like I'm listening to you. It might not be exactly what you need, but it always went a long way when my brother needed someone to... express himself to.”

Izuku cracked a smile.

“Thanks, I think I'm... not great, but I can always talk to Kirishima, Tsu, and Uraraka. They're on the same case as I am.”

Iida nodded slowly, gesturing towards the exit.

“Then shall we?”

They walked out of the locker rooms side by side and just having Iida's support was more help than Izuku felt he could express to his friend.

They're training against Earthquake Disasters.

Cementoss is throwing up walls all around them. The ground itself is changing and groaning beneath their feet. The goal is to simply keep their teammates 'alive.' If Cementoss Sensei manages to knock them out of the field, then they fail the exercise.

Izuku has been zipping all over the place, grabbing his teammates and righting them, dragging them out of the way, pulling them along. He thinks they're doing well. He's been so distracted lately... what with losing Eri to Overhaul. Zoning out. His assignments not up to his normal standards.

This feels like an assignment that's been designed for him and his quirk though. It feels good, like he has a handle on this. Between him and Iida there able to keep everyone out of danger with relative ease and it only becomes difficult at the twenty-minute mark, their endurance being tested as Cementoss just... keeps going.

It's really impressive, actually, the way the man completely changes the landscape every few seconds without pause. He doesn't have a timer on him, but his best guestimate of the longest he's gone was ten seconds, maybe fifteen.

The sheer endurance the man has... its no wonder Sato and Kirishima failed against him in the last exam. The simple walls Cementoss had been throwing up was child's play and Izuku can see that Kirishima realizes this as they continue dodging and weaving, trying to stay as close to the center as possible.

Izuku twists over a large wall that leaps from the earth. YaoMomo grunts as she's thrown a distance away, Iida barely able to pull her back into a standing position before she hits the ground. He himself uses his speed to tug Kirishma to the left as three more walls begin to roll their way towards them.

It's taxing on the four of them.

They can't let their focus waver for even a second or they'll find themselves tossed out of the large training arena like a bug swatted by a cat. Izuku gets yeeted into the air by a wayward wall, he flips off of it, using his full cowl to bounce off of two separate walls and skid to a halt on the shaking ground, tackling Kirishima out of the way of wall coming at them sideways.

“Where is his limit?!” Kirishima groans, as he destroys a wall coming at them from the other side. “He did Todoroki’s team for thirty-five minutes before this!”

“Isn’t it amazing?!” Izuku asks, grinning from ear to ear.

“Yeah, sure,” Kirishima breaks another wall as Iida and YaoMomo land next to them, having finally escaped the living labyrinth trying to corner them off the arena. “Amazing is one way to put it. Ridiculous is another.”

“Plus Ultra,” YaoMomo murmurs, sweat glistening along every inch of her skin.

She creates her own medal brick, 5 feet tall, one foot wide and slams it down in front of the two walls trying to squish them, giving Kirishima the time to smash one and Izuku the other.

Iida eyes their landscape with a critical expression.

“Kirishima has a point... Cementoss has three more groups after this and he isn’t slowing down. It’s a bit alarming.”

The ground beneath them shifted.

Without batting an eye YaoMomo, wrapped her arms around Iida’s neck and Izuku used One For All’s strength to lift Kirishima’s heavier, larger form, green lightning dancing across his skin as the two speedsters went in opposite directions off the rising platform.

The training lasts another fifteen minutes before the alarm blares at them that they’ve passed. The four slumped into the observation deck, where the class is analyzing their reaction time and choices. At the back sit Todoroki, Kaminari, Ashido, and Koda- still worn out from their own session and pipping up half heartedly with thoughts.

Izuku falls in next to Todoroki, letting their shoulders nudge against one another and giving him a tired acknowledgement of existence. Todoroki nudges him back and they sit in companionable silence as the critique plays out and the next team gears up to enter the arena.

He feels a small bit of gratification at seeing Cementoss Sensei wiping at his forehead and taking a long gulp of water. At least they’d worn him out a little. He didn’t look nearly as worn out as he should considering things.

Izuku thinks of their training at the camp. Where they'd all been doing endurance training with their quirks for more power and time. Was this what it meant to finish that kind of training? To be able to use your quirk for such extended periods while barely breaking a sweat? It was unthinkable.

But then...

It wasn't really. How many articles had he read about heroes working for eight plus hours rescuing people from catastrophes? Constantly using their quirks? Those weren't on such a vast scale as Cementoss with the arena, but then again... he had heard the man once created a wall large enough to divert a Tsunami from a heavily populated city. Quirks were not equal. Izuku knew that more than most.

All the heroes working at UA weren't part of the average Pro you might find on the streets. UA Pros were some of the most elite heroes out there. Even as UA teachers they were still often called to work the front lines due to their experience and skill. It was the school All Might chose to find his successor. Other places simply couldn't compete on the same level. Though Shiketsu came pretty close.

The doors opened.

Izuku looked up to see Tsu, Aoyama, Shoji and Kacchan walk out into the arena. The screens lit up, the bots tracking each of them as they step onto the field. Tsu stretched her arms above her head as Aoyama nervously looked at the ground despite the clock not counting down yet.

This exercise definitely wasn't Aoyama's strong suit.

"Bakugou-chan," Tsu called out in her gravelly voice. "You have a plan already, don't you?"

Izuku couldn't help but snort.

Kacchan probably had three.

"No," Kacchan said blankly. Everyone stilled, both on and off the field. "I'll follow whatever you guys decide."

Izuku sat up straight.

What?

“Excusez-moi?” Aoyama blurted. “I believe my hearing has broken. Can you... repeat that?”

Kacchan looked away from them.

“I said do whatever you want.”

Izuku stood up, walking towards the screens, he felt Todoroki a step behind him.

“Um...” Tsu ribbitted, a startled expression stretching across her face. Tsu and Shoji exchanged glances while Aoyama appeared to pale. The thirty second countdown glared up at them in red. “Right... Bakugou-chan... Aoyama-chan isn’t the best with these sorts of things, can you hover with him above the arena? Shoji and I should be fine working together down here.”

Kacchan glanced at the others, that strange blank expression sending a chill down Izuku’s spine.

What?

“Okay.”

What?!

Ten seconds on the clock. Kacchan walked over to Aoyama who, Izuku couldn’t blame him, took a wary step back. Aoyama swallowed heavily as he gestured at first himself then Kacchan.

“How would you like to...”

“Hold on to my shoulders,” Kacchan instructed. “Legs around my waist.”

“Of course,” Aoyama chuckled nervously, throwing his arms around Kacchan, the dramatic red sunglasses nearly whacking Kacchan in the face. Kacchan who... who flinched bodily across the screen. Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku saw Kirishima and Sero wince in response.

With a ‘BOOM!’ the two of them took to the air. The sounds of the miniature booms echoing along the screen as Kacchan hovered using his explosions.

“Not so tight,” Kacchan hissed. “It’s my neck, not a rope!”

The count down reached zero.

Tsu leaped onto Shoji's back, in a similar manner to how they worked together for the Sport's Festival, but she let her legs fall below his limbs to wrap around his shoulders.

"Keep as steady as you can," Tsu instructed. "I'll use my tongue on the rising walls to steady us and move us around the field as we need. Use your hearing to give me a heads up for where a wall is about to rise."

"Roger that, Froppy," Shoji's voice echoes through the screen room.

It's a good plan. A good strategy. Utilizing the trust the two of them have in each other's ability. Making sure Aoyama is out of harm's way

All Might adjusts the cameras. The tiny zooming robot edging away and, rather than focusing on the individuals, focus on the teams, still close enough to hear them speaking to one another though.

Izuku finds his eyes drawn to Kacchan, trying to figure out what just happened.

"Maybe..." Sato says hesitantly, not too far in front of him, his deep voice reverberating in the otherwise silent room. "Maybe he really didn't have any ideas today. Its... everybody has off days, right? He's allowed to have off days."

"Of course," Kirishima agrees, loudly and eagerly.

But it doesn't break the tension in the room.

Because there's been something wrong for a while now and it doesn't seem to be getting better. And Kacchan hasn't made it easy for anyone to reach out to him about it.

He meets All Might's eyes, the worry clear there as they both look back at the cameras. Watching as Shoji leaps forward, one of his limbs spreading out to shield Tsu from a collapsing wall they've just swung around.

Above, one of the camera's clicks and Aoyama's voice becomes louder, more clear through the speakers in the observation room.

"I am not fond of watching them struggle from above. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Kacchan doesn't respond.

Izuku bites his lip.

Kacchan hardly seems to be paying any attention to Aoyama at all. His eyes are watching the arena below him.

“I don’t understand...” Iida says softly.

Hagakure hums beside him as they all continue to watch the earth platforms twist and shake violently across the screens.

Down below, Shoji is covered in sweat and grime as he runs along the wall, Tsu’s tongue attached to a rising peak.

“We could really,” Shoji’s voice cuts through the speaker, breathing hard, “use a Bakugou solution right about now.”

Tsu makes a sound in her throat as they land, her tongue retracting.

“I don’t think that’s an option today, Shoji-chan.”

“Ten meters to the left!” Shoji yells, one of his ear tentacles twitching in that direction. Tsu’s tongue shoots out and, as predicted, a giant wall shoots up and the two end up landing right on top of the rising monster. Unlike Izuku’s team who were determined to destroy the obstacles, they’re using the rising walls to leap onto new ones. Using the height to their advantage in order to stay away from the outer edges and to get a view of their surroundings.

Kacchan isn’t helping them.

He’s following a plan that’s not his own.

His and Kacchan’s exam comes to mind. Thinking of what would have happened if they’d followed Izuku’s plan without compromising? If they’d both run rather than face All Might head-on?

Even when Kacchan had been willing to lose in order to not work with Izuku, he hadn’t been like this.

‘*Complacent*,’ the dirty word slips into his head. ‘*Submissive*.’ There’s a blank look on Kacchan’s face that lacks his normal passion. ‘*Quiet*.’

Izuku hates it.

He hates it more than any of the mean spirited things Kacchan has ever spoken. More than the ‘*I hate you too*.’ He hates the person on the screen in front of him and he feels an urge to punch that person.

He’s never wanted to punch Kacchan more in his life than this

moment.

It doesn't feel like he's watching Kacchan at all.

"Don't ask dumb questions."

Like the answer was obvious. Nothing had ever been obvious about how Kacchan's mind worked though. For someone who seemed to see the world in such a straight forward manner, he was absolute shit about giving straight answers.

"Come *on*, Bakugou," Kirishima urges, his voice is low, but everyone hears it.

Long minutes that feel like hours tick by as no one says a word in the observation room as they watch Tsu and Shoji struggle against the earthquake simulation. Every once and a while Aoyama will speak up, prod at Kacchan.

But there's no response.

And then Shoji takes a nasty hit. One of his ears gets smacked hard against the wall by one of the boulders and he stumbles. Tsu lets go, attaching herself to the wall and wrapping her tongue around Shoji's waist.

They're being backed into a corner.

"Hey Sparkles," Kacchan's voice is clear through the screen. Izuku feels relief to see the calculating look in his eyes have returned. That scary blank look like a forgotten nightmare. Kacchan must have been practicing his endurance in flying lately, because its fifteen minutes into the exercise and he hasn't broken a sweat at all. He looks confident up there, no difficulty keeping the two of them high above the arena even though Izuku knows that a lot of extra power has to go into his explosions to carry extra weight like that.

"Yes?" Aoyama asks.

And it strikes Izuku then that despite Aoyama's wariness (formed from Kacchan's out of character actions), there's no wariness for Kacchan himself. Aoyama looks comfortable against Kacchan's chest. He is calm. Completely trusting Kacchan and his abilities to keep them so high above the arena.

And then something happens.

There's an odd flicker on Kacchan's face. The calculating look turns... anxious. Izuku feels himself move nervously from side to side himself. He's never seen that look on Kacchan's face before.

He's...

Kacchan is...

"I..." Kacchan's lips press flat. "Never mind."

Kacchan is doubting himself.

Everyone in the room is fidgeting now. Izuku glances over at Todoroki, whose normally blank face looks as baffled as Izuku feels. Ashido is squeezing Uraraka's arm as she stares intently at the screen, Kaminari staring over Uraraka's shoulder and leaning heavily against them both.

"What is he doing?" Sato whispered.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Sero is biting the tip of his thumb and with a start Izuku realizes the nail's been torn off past the skin and its bleeding in the corner.

Down below Tsu and Shoji are continuing to struggle with Cementoss Sensei's walls. Both of them work well together, but neither of them are very fast and that fact is catching up to them.

The face Aoyama is making looks constipated, his eyes looking a little too intense.

"Bakugou," Aoyama says in a strangely serious voice. "I want to hear what you have to say. What is your idea?"

Kacchan's eyes glaze over again, like he's not quite there.

Izuku feels his heart stutter. His chest hurts. He coughs harshly and realizes that he'd stopped breathing. The observation deck is so quiet, there's no idle talk about strategies and despite the fact that Tsu and Shoji are breathing hard now, moving more frantically, no one is watching their screen.

Explosion stutters out.

Half a beat.

A full beat.

Two beats.

They start to fall.

Sato already has his hands on Uraraka's shoulder, both of them are at the door, opening it. Izuku feels himself following. Sato is going to throw Uraraka at them. She can float them to the ground... they can...

...and then the loud 'BOOM!' makes every heart in the room start up again. Izuku feels a hand grab his own and sees out of the corner of his eye YaoMomo at his side.

Kacchan rights himself and Aoyama mid-air and adjusts the power he's using, regulating it so that they are hovering better.

He looks sick.

The color has drained from Kacchan's face.

Half the class stands half-read for action at the door, backs half turned from the monitors. All Might, his mentor is practically glued to the screen, finger on the comm in his ear, mouth open as if he were about to shout something.

Aoyama looks a bit ashen, his hands tightening again before relaxing at Kacchan's flinch. There was a long moment where Izuku felt as if he was the one hovering hundreds of feet in the air.

"Use your..." Kacchan faltered again, but his eyes remained clear. "Use your cape to tether your chest to my waist." The words sounded pained. So unlike Kacchan's normally clear and concise instructions. "I can maneuver us around the field. Destroy the walls I tell you too."

Oh.

Izuku found his eyes looking around the field, darting down to Tsu and Shoji. They were still moving around fine but... Kacchan was right. They were being forced into a pattern that would leave them fighting on the edge. If Kacchan could get Aoyama to destroy the ones Cementoss Sensei using to force their hands then...

It would allow Tsu and Shoji to stay near the center and out of danger.

Izuku looks back to see Aoyama finishing a knot, turning so that his back was against Kacchan's chest. Kacchan further secures Aoyama, wrapping his legs under the other blonde's armpits.

And then he shoots off.

It's an almost funny image, like a weird, human version of a helicopter, if it weren't for Aoyama's sniper-like lasers destroying walls left and right. Tsu is nearly knocked off of Shoji's shoulders by the edge of the arena, but Kacchan quickly salvages their exercise. Getting Aoyama to create a crater in the arena with his beam for the two to roll into at the last possible second before falling off the arena's edge.

From there Kacchan destroys every one of Cementoss Sensei's attempts to steer them back towards the edge. The apprehension he'd felt earlier melts away into the familiar admiration as the clock chimes down to the last seconds.

Aoyama looks ready to kill over by the time they make it to the ground. He has his arms wrapped protectively against his stomach, but there's a proud shine on his face. Shoji casually picks Aoyama up and carries him into the observation room, despite looking beat tired.

"Thank you, Bakugou-chan," Tsu tells Kacchan, another ribbit slipping through as she gives Aoyama a side hug. "Thank you, Aoyama-chan, Shoji-chan."

Tsu, Aoyama and Shoji all take advantage of the seat in the back. Izuku almost feels jealous, because his group hadn't. So thrown off guard by...

Izuku looks over at Kacchan.

Kacchan did not take the seat.

He stands stiffly behind everyone, not unusual. Neither is the slight frown on his face or his folded arms. What is unusual is the tension written in every line along his body. There is nothing that relaxes Kacchan like a work-out or training exercise, but right now he looks like a string pulled tight.

He doesn't look like he just passed a tough Earthquake exercise. Izuku feels his worry spike again. Kacchan looks like he failed. He's disappointed in himself, Izuku can tell. Nothing about this feels right at all.

All Might clears his throat.

Izuku finds his eyes drawn to his mentor who looks immensely

uncomfortable.

“Good job, all of you,” Toshinori tells them.

Izuku realizes that no one has said a word about the strategies used. No one has spoken up about their thoughts and critiques. The room is dead silent. Lacking the normal excitable chatter that always ensues after their classmates have succeeded.

And no one is looking at Kacchan.

“I...” Izuku stumbles, drawing everyone’s attention to himself. The faces of his classmate’s grim expressions greet him, including Kacchan who looks as if he’s hunching, arms folded so tightly for a moment Izuku’s worried that he’ll bruise himself. “Tsu’s strategy to maximize the team’s ability to survive by taking into consideration her team mates weaknesses and strengths was well thought out. Though, because there were no comms in this exercise, that same strategy meant they could no longer communicate with one another once Kacchan and Aoyama went airborne.”

Tsu nodded her head.

“Yes, I hadn’t quite realized that until Shoji-chan and I started to really struggle,” she admitted. “It would have helped to have Bakugou-chan’s advice from up above.”

Izuku nodded.

“Our team could have also used YaoMomo’s quirk to create comms for ourselves. Establishing communication in a situation where we don’t naturally have our comms should have been a top priority, but I’m only now just thinking of it.”

“I considered it,” YaoMomo said quietly. “But we were already on the move by time I thought to create them and in the heat of the exercise, I wasn’t able to communicate those thoughts and actions. I’ll have to work on my ability to multitask in the heat of the moment.”

“All good points!” All Might said warmly. “Though I would like to point out that Asui’s group did, in fact, have a means to communicate.”

All Might pointed at Shoji.

Shoji looked startled for a moment, then embarrassed.

“Yes. With my hearing, if Bakugou gave any advice or if Aoyama needed to tell us anything, I could have kept an ear in their direction to hear them,” Shoji agreed, looking thoughtful. “Though there’s no way that I would have been able to communicate my words or Tsu’s to them.”

“Its best to keep all the advantages you can get in a situation like the one presented to you today,” All Might reminded them. Then his eyes fell upon Kacchan and his face fell. If possible, and Izuku had been certain it wasn’t, Kacchan scrunched down more as the attention turned back to him. “Young Bakugou, I applaud your... improvement in teamwork.”

That didn’t feel right.

That didn’t feel like what Kacchan was doing.

No one in the room seemed convinced of that either.

“What are your thoughts on the exercise?” The withered form of Izuku’s mentor prodded, speaking far more carefully to Kacchan than he’s ever seen.

With what looked like great effort, Kacchan’s arms fell to his sides, hands shoved into pockets in an attempt to look casual that absolutely no one found convincing. And it was with steadily mounting confusion that Izuku realized Kacchan hadn’t spoken up today about anything. Even though Kacchan was usually the first to point out, in his own unique way, ways that their classmates could have fixed things or done better.

Kacchan shrugged, his eyes sliding away from them and to the screens. He wasn’t... Kacchan wasn’t meeting anyone’s eyes.

“Sparkle’s... endurance isn’t awful now,” Kacchan gritted out.

There was silence at the short answer. Everyone waiting for Kacchan to continue. To break the whole exercise down into pieces and deliver cutting, if well thought out views on each person’s decisions and actions. Including his own.

But he didn’t continue.

He didn’t say anything.

There was a rustle of cloth at the back of the observation room, so

loud in his ears it might as well have been the curtain closing across a thousand foot stage.

“I will take your beautiful compliment, mon amie,” Aoyama announced with a flourish, before bending over further in pain, his last words coming out in a gasp, “for what it truly means.”

There was no huff of irritation.

No angry denial.

“Yes,” All Might announced, drawing the attention back to him, the man looked uncertain, his smile twitching in place. “Asui also did very well today. Her leadership and decisiveness at the start of the exercise was brilliant with the limited time you were given. With time and experience, I think you will make a fine leader to an agency. Shoji, you consistently used your extra limbs to protect Asui from falling debris, you kept your teammates needs in mind and I must commend you for your honorable actions. However, you must remember to protect yourself! You also consistently disregarded your own safety and while I understand your limbs grow back, that in no way means you should be careless in protecting yourself!”

Shoji bowed his head.

“I will work towards being more cautious.”

All Might grinned.

“I will make sure of it.” The man said evenly. “Your next independent training session will be with Aizawa and it will be solely defensive training for you.”

Shoji jolted, eyes widening before he bowed his head again. The class collectively felt for him. That was not going to be pretty.

A green light lit up the room.

“Alright, looks like Cementoss is ready for the next group. We’ll be continuing this discussion later in class,” Toshinori said, almost in relief.

Uraraka, Jirou, Tokoyami and Mineta walked out of the observation deck and into the arena. Uraraka kept the group floating though she began to waver a little almost halfway through the exercise and by the end they’d taken up a defensive circle with Jirou and Tokoyami

blasting rocks as they guarded Uraraka's vomiting form. Ojio, Sero, Hagakure, and Sato failed when they'd accidentally lost track of Hagakure and she'd been knocked out of the ring.

Kacchan stayed quiet through the last two team's critiques.

All Might didn't ask him again.

Grounding Techniques

Chapter Summary

Katsuki is cranky and exhausted and frustrated with himself as he keeps falling back into old habits when he's around Kirishima. Detective Tsukauchi neglects his own health in an attempt to handle all of his cases.

Author's Note: Katsuki indeed does not have a head cold and he's not sick. He just exhausted himself to the point his body can't handle it. Which is a frustrating point to get to when there's no actual symptoms but you feel like shit and can lead to your body being weakened and susceptible to illnesses. Self-Care is important!

Chapter 17: Grounding Techniques

Katsuki was pretty sure he had a head cold.

There was a fog wrapped tight around his membrane and his limbs were heavy, as if he had Deku hanging off of his arms or ankle like when they were kids. (Never got why the fucker was always so grabby.)

No temperature though. He'd checked. Three times. Not even a headache. His bones felt a little achy, but it was ignorable. Even the biometric scanner his dad had slipped into his bag before he left stated that there was nothing wrong. He was sure even Recovery Girl would send him away with a huff.

What he couldn't shake or ignore was the way his equilibrium was off. How when he took a step it felt as if he was missing it. As if the floor had turned to air. He found himself blinking hard, putting his hand out to steady himself. But he hadn't really fallen in any way. He was still upright, and he didn't think there was a danger of passing out at all. He was just... oddly off balance.

It was an annoyance and an inconvenience.

He had a test today.

Granted, no matter how much his classmates complained about Aizawa busting their balls, Katsuki didn't consider the tests too

difficult. Then again, he never *waited* to study. He scheduled time every day to go over materials for just these kinds of issues so that he wasn't fucked if something came up that stopped him from studying the day before the test. Just because he was prepared didn't mean shit if his head wanted to check out of commission for the day like some third-rate lazy piece of trash.

"Hey Bakugou," Kirishima called uncertainly, "are you... are you making soup?"

Katsuki glowered.

"It's seven in the morning," Kirishima pointed out quietly, concern already lacing his voice as if Katsuki making soup was the delivery of third stage cancer. "Not feeling well?"

No good do gooders and their ridiculous need to make every minor scratch or bruise into some god awful soap opera. Every fall into some life or death situation- Katsuki swallowed. Shit. He was in a mood, wasn't he? Fuck.

Kirishima was the last person who deserved to take the blunt end of his sour mood.

Katsuki flipped the flame off, trying to will himself into a better mood through sheer force of will. He grabbed a to go cup with one hand and the saucepan in the other. He kept his mouth shut as he worked, his eyes meeting Kirishima's as he poured the hot soup into his cup, popped the lid on, and sipped.

"You should stay here if you aren't feeling good," Kirishima pushed.

...and tried very hard not to crush his disposable cup in his hand.

He breathes in and counts to five. Though he knows this only makes it look worse. Makes it look as if he's gathering himself and proves he's out of it rather than the mental wall he's trying to throw up between them. He hates the nagging. He knows how to take care of himself. He's been doing it pretty much by himself for many years. Katsuki knows his limits and yeah, maybe he hasn't been really listening to those limits here and there, but he's usually way better at it than any of these self-sacrificing, moral spouting, bone breaking, rule ignoring, late night just because idiots.

He washes the pot, puts it on the wrack to dry, then swings his backpack over his shoulder.

“You gonna slow me down or are you gonna grab your breakfast so I have time to quiz you?” Katsuki demands, quirking one eyebrow and not slowing down in the least as he walks towards the exit.

Kirishima scrambles. He could hear the redhead shoving pop tarts in his pocket, the crinkle unfortunately familiar to him since he’d started walking to class with the idiot. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the redhead shove one into his mouth, silver packaging still halfway on as the guy catches up to him just as Katsuki swings the door open.

“You’re a mess,” Katsuki tells him, *not* fondly.

Kirishima still grins at him as if he’s been given a compliment.

Katsuki *allows* him to walk in front of him. The redhead walking backwards and talking with his mouth full, one hand waving emphatically. Katsuki listens to his questions on their study guide and answers them one by one as they enter the actual school itself.

“I’m confused about the compensation law concerning parasitical quirks....” Kirishima moaned, he keeps a careful distance between them, his head turning slightly to watch where he’s going as he walks backwards. “What makes it different from a puppet law or an abuse of ability law? Like, I get that the means are a little different, but it seems to be overcomplicating things. All three of them can cause mental and physical damage so...”

It’s a fair question.

The Slime Villain had been a parasitical quirk. He shudders at the very thought. Almost missing a step. It’s hard to explain (nor would he or will he ever) to Kirishima what it was like. The way it had... when it had... entered him. It made him feel gross just thinking about it. Down his throat- it had felt as if claws were being dragged along his insides... as if he was being violated.

Or All For One’s quirk... The way it had required the man to latch onto Katsuki’s body in order to transport him unwillingly towards the Boss Villain. The horrid stench and taste that had overwhelmed his senses as he was literally dragged away from All Might. The Forced Quirk Activation appeared to be parasitical too though All For One had claimed it caused no damage to the host so maybe that was commensalism. There was a whole other set of laws for that but since it wasn’t on the test today, it was probably best not to bring that up to Kirishima.

That would only make the other panic.

A puppet quirk though... like the one Shinso Hitoshi had was able to control another person but didn't cause any damage and often times the victim didn't remember what happened during the course of the quirk usage. It was still an invasive, terrifying thing. The quirk could still be used to hurt the person, of course, but it was different.

Their texts stated that the compensation was based on the level of trauma each of the quirks resulted in, but that didn't feel quite right. It felt too much like comparing trauma and that didn't sit well with him. He didn't think that trauma could be compared. It just was.

If he was forced to do something awful against his will then how would that compare to what the Slime Villain had done? He wasn't sure and wasn't at all willing to find out. Laws needed to be firm though, so he understood the need to categorize and label, the need to keep things as black and white as possible even in a world of grey. It fucking sucked and it hardly ever reflected the reality of the situation well, but...

"Bakugou?"

Katsuki felt the fog in his head thicken as he moved too quickly, head shooting up to look at Kirishima. He felt his body go through that weird stumble, like it was floating even while his limbs were trying to drag him to the ground. He righted himself, but not fast enough for that stupid face Kirishima was making to not deepen into his 'I saw that and I'm about to say dumb shit.'

"You're obviously not well enough to be in class today, bro."

"The only thing I'm not well enough for is to hear your shit," Katsuki snapped. He shudders, Tokoyami baring down on him after he's overused his quirk. His arms burn but the sick, burning feeling of fear is much worse. He blinks and it's only Kirishima there. No dark figure striking downwards. No dark shadow wrapping around his legs to keep him there.

God fucking damn it.

He breathed in deeply.

He'd been somewhat successful in keeping his trap shut lately. Bar the shit show that was their earthquake training. It was so hard to do that around Kirishima though. Especially when he was in a bitchy mood.

This is the part where his dad would be giving him 'the look' that said 'now that wasn't very nice, Katsuki, apologize.'

Katsuki usually flipped off whoever he was meant to apologize to behind his dad's back though so...

"The compensation is based on the damage done to the person." Katsuki began, ignoring the heavy stare that was being leveled at him. "Think of it as..." He frowned, staring at the ground. "Damage can be far reaching no matter what kind of trauma it is," he started, trying to find the right words. "So pretend that a puddle, a pond, and a lake all spread out across a mile radius- that represents the trauma. It can cover a lot of ground, but the compensation is based on how deep it is. So a puddle is an abuse of a quirk's ability, a pond is an abuse of a puppet quirk's ability, and the parasitical quirk is represented as a lake."

"But people are different and this stuff affects them all differently! You can't just compare one bad thing to another like that and assume that one type of trauma is for sure less than another," Kirishima said in annoyance. "And there's different ways to abuse a quirk that could hurt a person, how can the law state for absolute sure that it's a puddle type damage?"

Katsuki flicked him in the arm, tugging him out of the way of a pole he was about to walk backwards into.

"Determining that isn't our job."

"But...!"

"No. Listen." Katsuki had to take a second to steady himself. Fuck. He was tired. For once he sort of wishes he'd stayed in bed. Screw the consequences. To sleep for a more few hours. That was weak shit though.

His mom had always taught him that unless he was dying he needed to get his ass up for school. The Hag might be a mean bitch most of the time, but she'd at least called him out on any laziness. Any weakness he had she'd pinpointed and carved out of him.

He'd never admit this to anyone, but he used to not be able to handle a large group of people. She'd forced him to every social event. Taught him to keep his hands in his pockets- even had his dad sew little grippers he was supposed to keep hold of the whole time inside the pockets, hidden away where no one could see his fists tightened.

She'd been the one to teach him his grounding techniques. Told him to keep doing that through the whole experience. She refused to have a son who ran away from social events. Katsuki didn't have to talk much, she promised, but he needed to stay calm and to not run. Not be a coward.

So he'd learned.

Just like he'd learned that if you let every sniffle or off day keep you from working that it would lead to finding any excuse not to work. That was one of the few things both his parents had in common. They were both hard working. As far back as he could remember, they'd never missed a day of work, even when his dad had gotten into a car accident the day before and fractured his ankle, he'd hobbled his way to work with a pair of crutches and enough pain meds to down an elephant.

He fought the fog in his head, vaguely aware of the odd, stilted way he was walking. Katsuki grit his teeth and touched his bag. The material was rough against his fingers, though he knew the inside was thick and padded to protect his laptop when he carried it with him. It was a simple grey- to conform with the school's requirements of nothing 'too violent.' His head still felt foggy, but he zeroed in on Kirishima who was waiting patiently for him to continue. He found if he focused on Kirishima, it was easier to keep himself grounded.

"If you're walking in a puddle barefoot long enough you'll get trench foot. If you can't swim then it doesn't matter if it's a pond or a lake because you'll still drown. There might be toxins in the water that soak into your skin in which case it doesn't matter if it's a puddle or a pond or a lake, you'll still die." Katsuki takes a breath to steady himself. It's hard to concentrate today and his thoughts feel as if they are trying their damndest to slip through his fingers. "Or the water in one might be frozen over... there's a million ways one of these could be made worse (and its often multiple differences) but that's why we have every crime judged by a court of law. It's the courts job to see the poison, the ice, whether the person was put in intentionally or accidentally, how long they've been there," Katsuki points at the study guide Kirishima has in his hand.

The other blinks, eyes scanning over the section Katsuki is indicating, following along with each jab of the paper.

"The laws are vague and simple for a reason. Because the laws are not supposed to be the final word. We are. Any crime a person commits is

done with a thousand circumstantial things behind it. It's our job to follow the rules and laws- to understand them and to follow them, to bring them in with the understanding that we aren't the final end all be all, and it's the court's job to determine to what extent and what circumstances those laws were broken."

When he pauses to collect his thoughts and to hear the usual confirmation of understanding his friend gives him. But it's just silence. Kirishima stared at him for a long moment, to the point that Katsuki very nearly snapped at him. Only to realize there were tears in the idiot's eyes.

"What the fu- " Katsuki's mouth snapped shut. He flinched, waiting for the association, but it didn't hit him. Instead, he felt a firm hand on his shoulder, and he was brought in for a half hug that caused the world to melt around him for a moment. He grabbed back at the body, steadying himself and trying not to snap at Kirishima or give way the fact that his grip on the other was the only thing holding him up.

"You are the coolest, Bakugou," Kirishima told him.

He stilled. It was one of those dumb things Deku would say when they were kids. Before Katsuki learned how scarily obsessive the idiot would get. How two faced Deku could be. How Katsuki was the coolest one second and the worst the next. Never a middle ground with the shit nerd. Full of pep talks and lies and delusions he wanted to convince everyone of.

Katsuki pushed Kirishima off.

"What are you talking about? I was just answering your freakin' question. Don't pass compliments out like their candy. It stops meaning anything when you do that."

"Is *that* why you can't take a compliment?" Kirishima said in a teasing voice. "You know I'm always gonna tell you the truth whether that's calling out your bullshit or if I'm complimenting you. I do both all the time and they're both legit."

Katsuki grinned at that, reminded of the promise Kirishima had made about never lying or sugarcoating things even when he was trying to manipulate Bakugou into going to the pool with them back when summer first started. He'd never try to dance around what he was saying, never try to make it seem like it was something else. If he was bribing Katsuki then he always stated it was a bribe. If he was trying to guilt trip him then it was a guilt trip. If he was trying to convince

him to hang out then it was a case by case with open reasons for why.

Never a compliment given with an expectation behind it.

Never a passive insult or compliment with the intentions of putting him down.

Or pretending to not be competitive when he competes just as hard.

Or pretending to have a kind offer but it's meant to see how Katsuki is doing instead, to see if he's 'stable' enough to interact with.

Or pretending to call for one thing when it was for something else.

Or...

Katsuki shoves Kirishima even further away from him, even though leaning on the other had made it easier to walk.

"Fair enough."

"I get it now," Kirishima says sincerely. "Thanks man."

"Prove that you understand by passing the test."

Kirishima chuckled.

"I can't believe he's gone because of *him*."

That voice is not Kirishima's.

The snide voice startles them both but it's Kirishima who turns. He's frowning, eyes scanning the hallways for whoever spoke. Brows scrunched up in confusion. Katsuki feels his soul sag. He's too tired for this.

"What..."

"How can you be friends with him?"

This time Katsuki turns to see some guy whose only taller than Shoji because his dumb hair is obnoxiously styled outwards and up. Like some biker gang wanna be. For once Katsuki has no want to put up a fight here. But Kirishima's brows have hardened and there's a line where his quirk has worked its way down to his jawbone. Some of his teeth unnatural sharp as they take in the 'opponent.'

“Are you...” Kirishima said in disbelief. “Are you talking to me?!”

“Who else? You aren’t gonna make it very far in the hero course hanging around that low life, you know, same for the rest of your little group. Everyone knows exactly what he is.”

Katsuki’s hand reaches out and grabs hold of Kirishima’s shoulder at the furious look on the redhead’s face.

“Funnily enough,” Katsuki said calmly. “Red Riot can stand on his own and he doesn’t need your approval to be the best hero out on the field. He’s *obnoxiously* kind and can take my strongest attack. He’s a hero because he always gets back up, not because he panders to people like *you*.” Katsuki stepped forward, making the asshole nervous. The body under his grip stilled. “Same goes to the rest of the ‘group.’ Each one of them could go Pro right now and make it to the top ten in the next year. Anyone who doubts that is an idiot.”

He heard Kirishima make a noise in the back of his throat.

“Tch,” the guy bristled, taking a step closer to match Katsuki’s. “It’s your fault All Might is gone. You *still* think your hot shit? You’re a monster. And anyone who associates with you should be treated the same.”

“They don’t have anything to do with what I’ve done,” Katsuki hissed. The body under his hand jerked. Katsuki took one more step forward, getting into the taller student’s face. The asshole faltered at the action, tensing. “You want to go after me? Fine. I can take it. You go after anyone else and I’ll bury you.”

The guy gulped, taking a step back, but every line along his body was angry.

“It doesn’t matter if we say anything to them or not.” The guy spat. “You think its just this school? You think the public is going to allow someone like you to get a license? I bet they already have measures in place to stop you.”

Katsuki froze.

The guy noticed, a smug grin spreading along his face.

“But you already know that, don’t you? They’ve already done something.”

Katsuki's grip on Kirishima loosens. The body under his hand disappears for the smallest fraction of a second, he feels weightless. Lightheaded. And then there's someone in front of him. Kirishima's back is to him. The redhead is in the other guys face and moving forward, forcing the guy to stumble back.

Kirishima backs the guy up against the wall and now...

Now everyone is watching. He can hear them whispering all around them and fuck. Couldn't they have done this shit another time?

"Oi!" Katsuki calls out, but it sounds breathless. He hadn't realized how much of his weight had been leaning on Kirishima until that moment.

"Let's get one thing clear," Kirishima growled, pushing the other lightly into the wall. Now his whole face is hardened, all sharp edges and voice gravelly in his throat. "Bakugou didn't cause All Might to retire. The Villains did. My best friend was *kidnapped* so how fucking dare you try to blame it on him."

Katsuki swallows against the lump in his throat.

'Idiot,' the word feels choked even in his own mind. He doesn't trust himself to speak. '*Such a god damn idiot.*'

"Bakugou is one of the bravest people I know, including All Might himself!" Kirishima continued. "He..."

"Didn't even have a scratch on him!" Someone from the crowd watching the three of them shouts out. "You're telling me he was with the Villains for three days and they didn't hurt him at all? They were trying to recruit him! You want us to believe he's not part of the League? That he escaped with nothing when All Might looked like that?!"

"Nobody wants him here!" Another student yelled, a business student with her hands fisted.

Katsuki practically falls forward, grabbing Kirishima by the shoulder and hauling the other bodily away.

"Too bad! Looks like you lot are gonna have to suck it up and deal!" Katsuki calls out as he marches Kirishima away. The other looks shocked. His features have softened as his quirk fell away. The asshole who started all this looks triumphant. As if all his points have been

proven and Katsuki doggedly keeps going forward.

Weird things are happening to Kirishima's face. There's a blank look there that Katsuki's never seen before and he's half turned against Katsuki's hold as if he's thinking about turning around and giving them a piece of their mind. He's not having that shit though.

"Focus, Kirishima," Katsuki hisses. "Don't let them make you lose focus. We've got a test, remember? That's way more important than those as- then those losers back there."

Kirishima turns wide eyes on him as he's dragged down the hall.

"How can you still be thinking about the test? After what just happened? We have to report that! We have to tell Aizawa!"

"Tell him what?" Katsuki demanded calmly.

Kirishima falters.

"That, dude! We have to report what just happened."

The wobbly, barely standing feeling returns and Katsuki closes his eyes.

"And what would you report?" Katsuki asks, sincerely. "That they were *mean*. That they said *mean things to me*? To you? All they were saying was the truth. Everyone knows it. They didn't throw a punch or threaten me or anything. There's nothing to report."

"First of all," Kirishima breathes out. He's trembling. From head to toe he's trembling. "First of all, fuck that."

Katsuki blinks.

"Bakugou, man, do you really..." Kirishima was breathing fast, "You can't think All Might retiring was your fault. It wasn't. How could it possibly be your fault?"

"He wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for me," Katsuki reminds him of the obvious. "If I hadn't been so weak that I got myself kidnapped..."

"Stop!" Kirishima braces against him, the weight nearly causing Katsuki to fall over. "I'm sorry, what the hell

did you just say?"

“If I’d fought harder, been smarter back at the camp then...”

“Then nothing, dude! Holy shit I didn’t... have you been thinking this the whole time?” Kirishima rings his hands, looking around as if the answer to his questions will pop out of thin air. Katsuki doesn’t understand though. The ground is firmly under his feet but the world is warping around him.

“Everyone does,” Katsuki says, confused. “Everyone knows.”

Kirishima looks like he’s going to be sick. Which is ironic in a not funny kind of way. Katsuki uses the grip Kirishima has on him to pull the other into their classroom and like a bucket of cold water he feels more awake.

Not alert.

His head is still crammed full of an icy fog that feels as if its crawling into his ear and eating its way through his membrane to lay right were his forehead and eyes are. But he’s suddenly more aware of his surroundings. He lets go of Kirishima, annoyed at himself when it feels harder to walk without the unintentional crutch. He tried to move to his desk only to feel a strong grip on his arm. He looks to see Kirishima looking at him in disbelief.

“Bakugou, we need to...”

“It’s not anything that can’t wait,” Katsuki cuts him off. Because like hell is he letting the idiot say anything in front of the eighteen other overdramatic asshats they have as classmates. He can always talk Kirishima out of whatever clique dramatic mountain he’s built up in his head. “We have a test to take.”

He tilts his head towards Aizawa Sensei whose looking at them with a raised brow. Their the last to class because of that hold up in the hallway. Even Kaminari and Mina are already in their seats. Class 1A doesn’t ever show up late (they’re better than that weak shit). But even so, class starts in 10 minutes and if their all here early on test days, Aizawa lets them start early and have more time. Kirishima bites his lip and he looks to be debating interrupting the god damn lesson for this shit.

“Times ticking,” Katsuki snaps. “Do you feel confident enough to do the test in less time than we normally get?”

At that Kaminari starts to make frantic hand motions at them. Mina

too looks seconds away from bodily hurling Kirishima into his seat herself. A true indication that they only have one-third of the test material actually memorized. Another one-third only partly memorized and the last third will be context clues, guesswork and common sense playing a hard fight to earn enough points to pass.

How are these people *his* idiots?

At the back Iida looks as if he's swallowed a lemon.

Right. Deku's little group might have the more put together, bookish, competent members of their class, but they're also the more anal, stick in light limited locations, moralistic do gooders type.

"Sensei..." Kirishima starts. "After the test, I need to talk to you."

Aizawa nods, looking oddly attentive.

Katsuki mentally throws his hands up in the air. He feels a sharp shock as he turns and marches to his seat, practically throwing himself into it. Ridiculous. They are all ridiculous. How is he supposed to talk Kirishima down if the fucker is going to go all mother hen mode right the fuck after class ends.

He feels a shock again.

Fuck.

He's not stressed.

He'd not fucking stressed!

It's not like Aizawa doesn't know. It's all over the fucking media. It's all over the school. Everyone knows. Its not a secret.

Its just...

No one has really brought it up to his face yet. Despite the whispers and occasional random asshole saying shit, he hasn't had anyone he knows bring it up. It's been the elephant in the room sort of speak and Katsuki's preferred that shit to confronting it. He had no interest in dodging pity talks with Deku or subtle accusations from his classmates. He doesn't want to listen to lectures from his teachers about how he can do better, be better or worse... Midnight or Cementoss.

He doesn't want to make it a big deal.

He doesn't want to know how the others feel about it.

There'd been shock on Kirishima's face though...

He has to know.

Katsuki thinks of I-Island though. Of the restaurant they'd been to where Kirishima hadn't noticed what the people there were doing. Messing with his food like they had. Why Katsuki had been dismissive and rude about them when he'd brought up how 'weird' they were being.

Kirishima hadn't noticed that anything was wrong. Just a little off.

The test is being passed out.

Right. He walked to his seat and practically fell into it. The sturdy desk oddly cold against his skin today. He frowned.

If he had a fucking fever he was gonna throw hands. Useless thermometers. He touched his knuckles to his forehead, but it felt cool to the touch. He wasn't sick. There was nothing fucking wrong with him.

A test was placed in front of him.

Katsuki blinked hard, taking a deep breath and not looking up at his teacher as he struggled to make sense of the words he was reading while avoiding thinking of Kirishima and UA students and stupid media and this fucking not a cold thing consuming him.

Abuse of Quirk ability is the most common and wide-spread form of law breaking in _____ across the country. It is referred to as an _____.

Businesses.

Abuse of Power.

He hopes Kirishima remembers the trick about context clues. That the 'an' indicates that the answer starts with a vowel. He should know this

stuff regardless of any hints in the text but its always useful in triggering memory.

He moves on to the next question, resisting the urge to use his hand to keep his head up.

What are five ways a Pro-Hero can tackle a civilian safely whose been taken by parasitical type quirks?

Taken.

The word doesn't sit well with him. It doesn't sound crass enough. The word should sound just as vulgar as the action is. It should be a unique word distinct to the crime, not something used in everyday language.

He writes down the five ways meticulously, going slower than he normally would to make sure his handwriting is legible and that he hasn't spelled anything wrong. He's normally so quick on these, he finds himself checking the time to make sure time doesn't pull any tricks on him.

How should the situation be handled if the suspect is under the age of 18?

Trick question. All suspects should be handled carefully. No more aggression than is necessary to take them down. The right amount of use of force equal to the amount it takes to subdue the suspect. The only difference is in the way you speak. If it's a young child or a teen then you need to simplify and explain more, but no matter what the age, as long as the suspect does not pose an imminent threat to the public, yourself, or others then (technically) a Pro's job is to try to talk them down and resolve the issues peacefully. Just because the suspect is disrespectful or a full grown adult or any number of things doesn't mean that a Pro has the right to abuse their power to harm them more than is necessary.

Some of his classmates won't know the answer to that one.

But they know how to do it and they would choose to do it regardless of not knowing the answer. Even so, a few of them will panic because of this. There are no laws that distinguish between an adult and child suspect. There are guidelines, sure, there are lessons they'd been given on how to communicate with accidental quirk abuse and all sorts of shit, but there are no laws for it.

Katsuki knows the answer but he's never been good at holding back. And he sure as fuck would mess up the stuff dealing with kids.

If Inasa- who keeps insisting that he and Todoroki should get along and would get along given the chance ever since they'd started their remedial course. If Inasa and Icyhot hadn't gotten into that pissing contest then he has no doubt both of the bastards would have passed without issue at the exam. Because for some fucking reason the half and half bastards awkward handling was considered endearing rather than just fucking awkward.

The three of them are different than the other students too.

Every other person attending the remedial course was there because they lacked the technical skills. First thing Gang Orca had told those losers was that he would be working them into the ground like they should have been since the moment they knew they wanted to be heroes. He thrived in the physical work outs and lectures that were given. He already knew that shit. Already had the routine down.

What is the law regarding long term abuse of quirk ability?

Given that the perpetrator was knowingly using their quirk to perform the abuse that person will be charged with an 'abuse of power' for each individual incident that can be confirmed.

The central issue with that concept was that it wasn't very feasible to attain that kind of evidence. At the very least it required the person to come forward and testify and nobody liked being labelled a victim- especially when that shit goes on your records for the rest of your life. Not in the same way that a criminal charge did but... in a lot of ways that mattered.

People judging you from afar... in your work environment like with internships. In school with the other students. Out and about town. It follows like a stench permanently soaked into the skin.

...

Katsuki really hates this test.

Not like its so different from any other. Three weeks ago there had been a test on Rescue work and if that shit hadn't been targeting his failings, he's not sure what could. He's probably seeing things that aren't there though. Sights and insults that aren't there. Being oversensitive or some shit.

Katsuki presses the pen onto the paper too hard, leaving a large black stain beside one of his answers. He takes a calming breath and moves on to the next one and the one after that. He knows the right answers. He knows them.

Pro-Heroes are expected to help monitor one another's behavior to ensure no abuse of power or ability takes place. What are five signs of abuse of power/abilities?

Uses position of power to receive favors from its subordinates/civilians/fans/others.

Threatens or manipulates to get what they want.

Threatens or attempts to scandalize those who don't comply with their demands.

Must be in absolute control of every situation.

Uses and objectifies others for their own agenda.

There's more, of course, more signs. He'd memorized all of them for this test and had been a bit unsettled by them. Though he's not sure which figure in his life he should be looking at. Which face sits most comfortably next to these words. The Hag, of course- the way she seemed to want to force him to be exactly who she wanted in a son and wanted to carve out all those things that she didn't like, as if he

was a piece of meat partially rotten that she wanted to salvage. The therapist bitch. Obviously. The Commission. Midnight. Though his teacher only had the one incident, that shit had started everything in Katsuki's life going to hell in a broken handbasket full of more shit.

Katsuki pinches the bridge of his nose as his vision seems to go in and out. The skin there is soft but sweaty. The pads of his fingers feel rough and there's an odd feeling along his body, like he's not quite there, which is dumb. It's a dumb thought because he is here. Filling out stupid test questions and having some kind of weird, emotional bout in the middle of the god damn classroom like some five-year-old kid who can't control themselves.

He's better than this.

Better than this damn head cold or whatever it is.

He's not sick.

At least, according to the temperature that had read across the flimsy piece of plastic this morning. According to Symptoms he'd looked up not matching anything specific other than exhaustion. Which he wasn't. He'd gotten a full eight and a half hours of sleep.

Nothing had been happening that was out of the norm.

He was going to fucking classes.

He was staying quiet.

Keeping to himself.

He hadn't involved himself in anything to be exhausted. Only his normal shit. His training and classes and the remedial stuff and the therapy stuff. He hadn't been doing anything to deserve to be exhausted.

"Time."

Katsuki's head shoots up.

He stares at Aizawa and then back down at his paper.

He still has three questions to answer. That's not... that's never happened before. Katsuki stares at the paper like its personally offended him. Looks up at the clock and... and yeah... its been an hour since they started.

YaoMomo is already gathering up the tests and yet his isn't complete. She stares at him for a long moment, her eyes lingering in... fuck. FUCK! She looks concerned and doesn't that bite something deep inside his chest. He hates it.

He shoves the paper at her.

It wrinkles and she takes it, but she doesn't *leave*.

Why do they all have to be such nosy god forsaken...

He doesn't want to deal with this today.

Not right now, at least.

His head is too full of fog to try to figure out how he *should* be acting rather than his natural instinct to snap. To tell her to fuck off with her concern and that stupid face she's making. He knows there's something more appropriate here. Some reaction his crazy therapist had insisted he should do, but he can't focus enough to picture it.

He keeps his eyes straight ahead but that turns out to be a mistake too because... for the hatred of all that is holy in this world *why* is Aizawa staring at him like *that*? The exhaustion he feels doubles as a heavy weight falls onto his organs and tries to suffocate him because that look spelled a whole lot of 'not fucking good.' The look said 'I see my sweet students concern for you and that makes me feel concern so we are going to talk in the not so distant future.'

"Bakugou..." YaoMomo says, quietly.

She's trying to be discreet, but like most of the others in his class, she fails at it.

'Move along,' he wants to bark at her. *'Ain't one god damn thing to see here.'*

But he doesn't.

So she keeps going.

"It's perfectly okay to not push yourself if you aren't feeling well, I'm sure if you told Aizawa Sensei, he'd be more than happy to let you go back to the dorms to rest."

He must really look like shit if she could tell AND THEN had the balls to call him out on it.

Her tone is kind and gentle and Katsuki wants to bash his head in because he can practically *feel* Deku sitting up straight and the stare that's trying to carve itself into Katsuki's skull. He feels the way eyes turn on him like he's some bizarre animal in a circus performance.

"That's what I told him," Kirishima pipes up from the other side of the room and all the *not fondness* he'd felt for the blasted idiot that very morning shrivels up like an ill-timed popped balloon just as the candles are about to be blown out of a birthday cake.

Katsuki hunches down in his seat.

"I'm not sick," he tells her (and by unfortunate extension the rest of the fucking class).

"Perhaps," YaoMomo said carefully, and fuck how could someone say something while simultaneously saying the opposite? How did she sound as if she was proclaiming that Katsuki was a fucking idiot with one simple peaceful appeasement attempt?

He couldn't stop the glower he sent her.

"...but if you were feeling... not your best today, then I'm sure Sensei would still be more than willing to let you rest."

Like she was trying to console a child.

Screw her.

"I'm not an idiot," he hissed. And god damn it. After all the work he'd put in. After all the time and energy to not be antagonistic and to refrain from insults and to not be himself as much as possible... "I took a biometric and checked with a thermostat. There's nothing wrong with me. I know not to go into the field or to spread sickness to others if I'm ill."

Muttering started behind him.

Holy mother of the underworld and death. Deku was truly his greatest challenge in every avenue of patience and endurance. It was like he was designed to antagonize Katsuki with every mindless, thoughtless, obsessive action he took.

Katsuki grabbed his own wrist to keep himself from lashing out.

"So you clearly didn't *feel* good though," YaoMomo said, staring him

down. “If you tested it, then you’re admitting that you don’t *feel* good.”

“What does that have to do with *anything*?” Katsuki grouched. He’d already fucked it up. He might as well just start the fuck over tomorrow if he was going to be dealing with this kind of shit all day. “How I *feel* doesn’t matter at all.”

There was silence across the classroom for a moment. Even Deku appeared to have stopped muttering as YaoMomo stared at him speechless, the tests still in her hands. Katsuki only had enough time to wonder what the hell everyone’s problem was when he heard someone clear their throat obnoxiously in that obvious manner that meant something awkward had just occurred.

“Well that’s a horrifying thing to say,” Kaminari opened his big mouth a few desks over. “And yet it explains so much.”

“Huh?” Katsuki hissed. “There’s nothing wrong. There’s no reason to miss class or training over literally *nothing*.”

“It’s not nothing,” YaoMomo said quietly and *why* did she sound like her voice was wet? What the hell was wrong with these people? Why did every interaction with them have to end with some dramatic emotional roller coaster of bullshit? Katsuki tried to take a breath, struggling with it as that foggiess thickened for a moment.

“Bakugou,” Aizawa called out to him and Katsuki felt the overwhelming desire to yeet his classmates out of the window as he realized they’d drawn the attention of their teacher. The man staring at him as if his quirk’s neutralizing sight could somehow neutralize Katsuki’s stubbornness. “Yaoyorozu is right. There are more than just physical illnesses to contend with sometimes. Go back to the dorms and get some rest.”

He hates all of them.

Every last one of these motherfucking...

Katsuki stands, startling YaoMomo as she’s forced to take a step back. He gathers all of his stuff and shoves it into his bag aggressively. Just because he’s being ordered to go back to the dorms doesn’t mean he’s going to be complacent...

Katsuki pauses.

He's not proving anything like this. Just that he hasn't changed at all. That no matter how much time and effort he puts into fixing things, he's still the same person underneath. Katsuki grits his teeth and loosens his grip.

What's the point in all this effort is he's just going to throw it all away because of one bad day? One day of not feeling his best?

Going right back to his normal behavior.

What if his classmates were in his position? How would they act? How was a hero supposed to act right now?

He's drawing a blank.

He swings his bag over his shoulder, feeling a sense of defeat as he hunches his shoulders and feels himself glaring at his classmates despite trying to will himself not to. He shuffles out, forcing his feet to trace the ground so he doesn't stomp. Makes his eyes look forward instead of staring people down.

The walk back to the dorms feels like... its like his body has been given permission to shut down. He's drooping like ice cream in July with one too many scoops on the cone. The walk feels unbearably long and he tries to jog it, just to get back faster, but that causes a weird contortion of the earth beneath his feet and he's forced to a crawling walk.

He's so fucking tired.

Katsuki throws the door open with too much force and it bangs with enough noise that if anyone else were hear he'd be hearing about that. As it stands, there's only the plants that sit about lazily watching him as he drops his bag and sits on the couch. He's not really thinking of anything at this point. Not when he brings his feet up nor when he closes his eyes.

He'll get up in a few minutes.

Detective Tsukauchi has not slept in three days. He's pretty sure he fell unconscious for a few hours in the backseat of his car yesterday, but he's not counting that, and he's sworn his secretary to secrecy.

They're moving in on Overhaul tomorrow?

No.

The day after.

He has a lead on Kurogiri they need to start mobilizing for and he feels resentful that the League of Villains shove their hands into so many different boiling pots and cause the damn things to overflow. Bad enough they have their name attached to the nine precincts of death and Stain, now it's the god damn mafia.

When he'd agreed to take on the League of Villains case after the USJ incident long before spring had even ended, Tsukauchi hadn't expected a group of powerful (but severely inexperienced and erratic) villains to be more than a headache or two to deal with. He wasn't best friends with All Might to have just stood beside the man as he'd taken on the entire underworld- Tsukauchi had been in the field every day of All Might's career, fighting on the streets, through paperwork, dealing with the yellow tape and political bullshit and fallout.

It was easy to let the case at the corner of his desk get buried under all the other fallout he was dealing with. Easy to let Katsuki Bakugou fall through the cracks.

Tsukauchi never took the easy way out.

Katsuki's case seemed to be more and more disturbing the more he dived into it. It looked as if the kid had picked up the first few harassment calls and had opened up a good portion of the texts. Some of the voicemails also showed they'd been played more than once.

He threw up the timeline he'd been working on, lining it up against the starting point when the articles had begun to come out about the kid with after the Sport's festival. The pictures on the kid's phone of strangers (the LOV he suspected) lay bare before him in a timeline that was worryingly long.

And one of the numbers...

A burner phone someone had used for way longer than they should have. As if they were completely confident that the kid wouldn't reach out for help. Tsukauchi grimaced as he recognized that it was true.

According to his dad, Katsuki hadn't spoken a single word about the harassment. Which made Tsukauchi suspect that there might be more.

If there were pictures being sent to the kid through his leaked phone number then the chances of the kid having run into some of these people were high.

What's more, the burner phone belonged to someone who claimed to be Magne from the LOV. The personal observations left an empty pit in his stomach. The stalking she'd done to the kid... the little notes about his location. The texts indicated that Katsuki had seen so why hadn't the kid talked to anyone about this?

They spanned *weeks* leading up to the kids kidnapping. Right up to the photo that had been taken of him at the bus stop for UA students. Sent only hours after the kids had been at the camp. Magne, and he suspected it really was her, had become increasingly familiar with Katsuki in these texts though the kid had not responded to a single one of them.

The Magne case alone would be enough to put this in one of the tougher cases he had concerning kids but with the rest... the rest of this was a nightmare. The biggest harassment case concerning a minor in ten years.

One of his officers cracked his door open. The man moved in quietly, grabbing a few files off of Tsukauchi's shelf before heading back out. Leaving the door cracked. He shot it an annoyed glance as the noise of the rest of the office filled his space, but it kept him more alert, at least.

Magne and the burner phone sat heavily among the middle of the timeline, starting a week or so after the Sport's Festival and ending the day before Katsuki Bakugou was kidnapped. And Katsuki's interrogation made more sense with this information as well...

The way he'd calmly talked about being held down with Villains coming in one by one. The straight forward way he'd spoken about his experience with Twice throwing him around while his two personalities spoke both to Katsuki himself and each other. The way he'd spoken about his encounter with Dabi, the fire quirk user and how he'd bitten the others hand without hesitation.

The boy had paused though on Magne.

Wariness and fear had pulsed along his lines even when the kids voice had kept calm. Even though it had been reported that Dabi had been the one to drag the kid through the portal *by his neck*. Katsuki hadn't blinked at Dabi though, hadn't paused. Dabi was nothing to the kid.

Tsukauchi had known right then and there that Magne had hurt Katsuki in some way.

Now he had a pretty good idea of how.

Magne wasn't just one of the villains to the kid, she was the one who'd stalked him beforehand. Which complicated matters even more. Katsuki hadn't mentioned this even when pressed and all of his lines had read of guilt, nerves, fear, and a lingering hurt that ran far deeper and far longer than it should.

That lingering line had alarmed Tsukauchi more than anything.

Something like this had happened to the kid before and it hadn't ended well.

Like most of the League, Magne was a serial killer, a terrorist who saw the laws not as a guiding force created by people as a 'I give up the freedom to kill you in order to have the safety of not being killed.'

Governments were designed around exchanges of freedoms and therefore no one was completely free within a government. That was simply the name of the game. 'I exchange my right to take from others in order to not be taken from.' 'I exchange my right to speed on the road in exchange for not being in danger by others who would speed.' As a government is built up, these exchanges become more complicated and more specific in order to create a society of coexistence.

A person's right to do anything they wanted ended where it impeded on the right of another.

A government could and should be changed according to the needs of the people and Tsukauchi would never make the argument that certain political parties and groups over time had warped the foundation of the government in little ways to benefit them more. Recognizing that for the reality of the situation did nothing to change it though.

He and All Might did the best they could, of course, being as involved in the government as he was and having All Might's ear meant that together they could use their own 'influence' to make certain laws better. To fix the structure a little bit at a time.

It was how they'd garnered less biased laws against those with mutation quirks. How they'd managed to outlaw certain practices in

parts of Japan that had been... horrifying to those whose bodies weren't humanoid. All Might had spent six full months touring Japan at one point and taking pictures with and speaking with as many not humanoid mutation quirk holders as possible, striking down crime as he went, but mostly just trying to improve how people viewed them.

Tsukauchi put Magne's mini file in Katsuki's pile to the side to pull the others over.

These other ones were worrying as well... He'd traced every text and call he could, every voicemail left behind and it was oddly across the board. There were heroes here in the top one-hundred who'd harassed the kid. Civilians, businessmen, and Villains alike who'd reached out with bad intentions and thought threatening a child was a good use of their time.

We can't have people like you representing heroes out on the streets. If you graduate, we will destroy your brand and run you out of the hero business.

He'd traced that one back to a corporate office that made hero gear.

Individually, it was hard to peg down any solid way to incriminate anyone. A single, mild threat from one unknown employee in a large corporation was laughable and stupid to go forward with. These types of cases were always so much worse because of it. And what's more... going forward with a case like this required one key element: the cooperation of the victim.

Just from the evidence here, he knew getting Katsuki Bakugou to admit to being a victim at all was going to be a battle he wasn't sure he could win. His dad hadn't had any idea this was going on and after speaking with his teachers as subtly as possible about what they knew about this, he was certain they were mostly unaware of it as well; they'd taken precautions though, a multitude of precautions.

The Dorms.

Escorted visitations home.

Forcing the kids to file paperwork for even the mildest of ventures out.

Every package and letter had an expert check it over for threats while still maintaining the privacy of the student to the best of their abilities.

“...take my hand!”

Came the obnoxious voice from the other room. Tsukauchi felt an oncoming headache. How many times has he told them not to watch that bastard in his office area?

“I’m not comfortable doing that,” a woman’s voice floated into his office from someone’s phone. “You’re known for not sticking to the questions agreed upon.”

“You are a woman who has infinite influence in the automobile industry,” a smooth voice spoke out of the speaker. A voice belonging to a very familiar reporter who had been a pain in Tsukauchi’s ass for years. “You claim to want to be upfront about the practices your company and you yourself adhere to and yet you refuse to a simple truth quirk?”

“I agreed to do an interview with you without your quirk involved. Just two people. No tricks.”

“It’s a truth quirk,” Senji Fu raised both of his eyebrows as the sound of a crowd beginning to murmur. “I solemnly swear that I will not ask anything personal. That’s my truth.”

Tsukauchi feels himself curdle with disgust.

Maybe Senji Fu never asked anything personal with his quirk, but that in no way meant that personal things didn’t come out when talking about business or politics. It was nearly inevitable, especially with the way Senji Fu worded his questions.

It was reprehensible.

Of course, most didn’t see it that way.

“I know how this dance goes,” the woman said lightly. “I won’t take your hand just because it’s the unpopular thing to do. It’s not unsavory or deceitful to not want to be forced to talk rather than simply talking.”

“All we hear from you is talk,” Senji Fu dismisses smoothly. “But here, today, you could prove yourself trustworthy. Prove that the face you wear out in public is the face that you are.”

‘He’s turning the crowd against her. Using his viewers to force her hand.’

Mental Quirks were relatively common. Truth quirks were less so but still around enough that there were a few thousand of them floating around the registry. The thing was that ‘truth’ rarely meant fact and few understood that difference. Humans weren’t the same as science. There wasn’t a simple law of gravity where when an object is dropped it falls. When certain components are put together it makes an airplane or a car.

Human’s were often made up of their experiences and their experiences depended entirely on how they view the world, what emotions they feel during those times, those circumstances, those mental states, those upbringings. Their education, their genetics, their capacity and intelligence, their creativity... all of those things created completely different truths for different people.

There were a dozen ‘Truth Quirk’ Detectives out there, what better job for such a quirk? But few who understood the idea that their quirks didn’t reveal what happened in a situation, but how a person felt about those situations. Evidence provided the facts. A truth quirk often times only provided the motivation or reasoning of the individual who did the deed or who suffered the crime.

Tsukauchi often came across detectives who used their mental quirks in order to close a case and while there was little he could do to fire those individuals himself, he made sure to blacklist them from all police departments and cases that he could.

Officer Digress was the only ‘truth quirk’ user he trusted. The only person he actively and commonly consulted with. The man had a PhD in Psychology and was more cautious than even Tsukauchi in making decisions based on the ‘truth’ that they find. Neither of them used their quirks to make final decision, but more as guiding information to discover the heart of the case.

Senji Fu treated everything he ‘discovered’ as if it was the only side of the story that mattered and as if the ‘truth’ they compelled his interviewers to ‘confess’ as if they were facts. As if the world were white and black. As if humans weren’t capable of holding three contracting opinions on the same topic.

“I don’t care about my employees at all,” the woman’s voice comes across the screen.

He can see her now. Sitting across a small table on a talk show stage, hand being held by one, Senji Fu, his eyes are glowing a bright yellow that looks predatory as he smiles like the cat that ate the canary.

He missed the moment that she agreed.

He sends a sharp look at his officers who shuffle guiltily about. One of them pauses the phone and tucks it in his back pocket. They know how he feels about the man. They’ve been annoyed and disgruntled about his lectures enough to know that the man isn’t a trustworthy source and is more of a gossip hound and sensationalist than a real reporter.

‘It might not be the whole truth, but it is some truth,’ one of his officers had tried to protest.

‘Some truth isn’t the whole truth,’ he answered. ‘It’s as simple as that.’

The door to the police precinct opened with a ‘bang’!

The ‘click’ of several gun holsters opening reached his ears and Tsukauchi signaled for them to hold, eyeing the person standing in his doorway with an unimpressed air.

“You thought you could go behind my back and investigate my shit of a son,” Mitsuki Bakugou hissed. “Thought you could get a copy of my phone records, convince my soft husband to ‘help’ Katsuki as if you know anything about *my* boy. Manipulate *my* boys like playthings.”

‘Some’ truth had just walked through his door.

Communication is Key

Chapter Summary

Tsukauchi has asked Toshinori a favor and the Symbol of peace doubts himself as he mulls over how to fulfill that favor

Gang Orca gets a peak of some shady things going on

Tsukauchi and Mitsuki Bakugou have a long talk

Chapter Notes

The chapter that is all about Katsuki even though Katsuki is not awake for any of it.

Chapter 18: Communication is Key

Toshinori got the call in the middle of the night three days ago from Naomasa. Not so late that he should be alarmed, but late enough to know that his friend found it important enough that it couldn't wait.

It had been a long day of teaching and a developing problem he wasn't sure how to handle had arisen. One that Aizawa claimed he was currently handling, but that appeared to be more alarming by the day.

He picked up his phone without much thought.

"Toshinori, how are you recovering?"

How he was tired of that question.

No matter how well-intended it was and genuine the people who asked it. He'd *been* tired of it back when he first woke up from his lengthy number of surgeries after All For One hurt destroyed his lung and stomach in that fight years ago now. From Nezu and Recovery Girl, Gran Torino, David...

And Naomasa.

The forceful retirement of his All Might persona had only made that question echo more deeply across the board and general public There

was not an hour that went by in the public or private portions of his life where someone wasn't asking him that question.

A tired sigh escaped without his consent and he heard the sound of his friend fidgeting about looking for something to say in the long stretch of silence.

"I'm fine. As I always am when you ask," not in a mean spirited way, just bone-deep tiredness. A stern reminder that Toshinori was more than just his ever-present ailments that plagued him. "And how are you? I know they've been keeping you on your toes."

"That... is actually why I'm calling you so late. We've had a bit of a... development in the case."

"Yeah?" Toshinori perked up at that, straightening in his chair.

"I can't speak too carelessly about the case over a phone line, but... I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about Katsuki Bakugou."

Toshinori frowned into the phone.

"I can tell you right now that the boy was an unwilling participant from start to finish," he said darkly, a heat in his voice.

He knew what some of the news outlets were saying.

What some of his colleague had the audacity to come up to him to say. He'd been nothing but firm and hostile towards anyone who dared make those sorts of remarks in his presence. But he expected more from Naomasa.

"Toshi..." Naomasa's voice came out soft. "You know me better than that."

He lost his heat, slumping in his chair.

"You're right, I'm sorry. It's just been... rough since Kamino."

"I understand," Naomasa said softly. "New information has come to light that's revealed some disturbing things about Katsuki Bakugou's kidnapping."

That grabbed his attention.

"Like what?"

“I don’t have all the pieces yet, but it involves harassment and stalking cases. What can you tell me about Katsuki’s behavior before the Sport’s Festival and After?”

He wondered why Naomasa was referring to his student by his given name. It was unlike his normally professional friend. There were a few reasons, the most likely that Naomasa had gotten in deep in the case. Made it personal.

That didn’t bode well.

Harassment and stalking? He shuddered to think of what that might entail. Every bone in his body wanted to ask more on that, but he knew his friend wouldn’t go into details. It was frustrating and irritating. The man was doing this on purpose to him. But Toshinori wasn’t sure *why*. Naomasa only spoke this way to Toshinori when he was hacked off at him, which was a rare occasion, and on those rare occasions, Toshinori knew how he’d fucked up.

Here though he was at a loss.

It was better to answer the man’s questions at this point. It would lead him faster to the root of his friend’s anger faster than trying *to get* answers from Naomasa.

Toshinori bit his thumb as he thought back to the times in question. There was not much time between that first week with the USJ incident and the Sport’s Festival that took place only five or so weeks after school started.

But as for differences between the before and after?

“Young Bakugou hasn’t shown any differences in behavior, as far as I know,” Toshinori said slowly. “I know after the Sport’s Festival, after quite a lot of pushing on their part, he started to hang out with the group he competed with in the calvary battle.”

“So Katsuki was a loner *before* the Sport’s Festival?” Naomasa pushed.

“Well,” Toshinori paused, intrigued by the odd befuddlement in the man’s voice. “He isn’t exactly a social butterfly. Young Bakugou has always kept to himself. Stands at the back of the class. Doesn’t say a word unless he’s spoken to. Doesn’t get involved with the antics of his classmates. Prefers to work alone in everything. If he is around his small group of friends then it isn’t for very long.”

Naomasa hummed in the back of his throat.

“And you noticed no difference from before the Festival and after it? Are you absolutely sure?”

“I’m sure,” Toshinori said, a tinge of confusion he felt coloring his words, that and the blossoming worry turning wildly into a dust storm inside his chest. “He’s been very quiet and withdrawn since Kamino... avoiding me like the plague, if we’re being honest here, but there was no difference in his behavior from before and after the Sport’s Festival itself.”

After Kamino there had been obvious changes for even more obvious reasons.

But none so defining as after the Licensing Exam.

All Might had tried to approach Bakugou on a number of occasions. His student had done everything between casually disappearing around a corner in the crowded hallways of the school, to ducking into a room and (jumping out a window? He isn’t sure on that one) to outright running from him on one occasion. Though Ectoplasm had told him repeatedly that Bakugou had been avoiding listening to his advice about taking a break, Toshinori couldn’t help but note that Bakugou had looked stubborn but resigned to listening to the other teacher *until* his eyes had spotted All Might walking towards them.

He was torn from his thoughts by Naomasa’s next words.

“His father said the same thing.”

“You spoke to the Bakugous?” Toshinori grimaced.

“Masaru told me that Katsuki keeps to himself. He said the only thing he noticed was that Katsuki stopped playing on his phone after the Festival.”

“Odd, I’ve never seen him play on his phone to begin with,” Toshinori said thoughtfully. Though... he’d only really been around the kid on a more regular basis a few weeks before that. And despite certain rumors, Bakugou was strict with himself about following school rules, and one of them was no phone use during training. [Kaminari had attempted to break that rule with his headset on a number of occasions, having a smartphone on the watch hidden under his sleeve. Using his hero gear to listen to tik toks during training.]

It was such a normal teenage thing to do. It had never even occurred to him that this was just one more difference between him and his classmates. One more distinction. Now that it was brought to his attention, it reminded him of the careful way the boy ate in the cafeteria. The cooking some of his students talked about in the Heroics class. The kid seemed oddly versed in adult things and completely ignorant of others.

“It’s not so odd when considering his phone was the source of the harassment and stalking,” Naomasa said sourly. “Have you noticed anything out of place about Katsuki? Even if it’s minor.”

Toshinori sighed heavily.

“That’s a loaded question if I’ve ever heard one,” he muttered.

“How so?” The sharp tone told Toshinori that his friend’s quirk had activated even though there was no means for it to do anything through a phone line. It was the sound of his friend finding a trail.

“Young Bakugou is... hard to describe,” Toshinori said carefully.

“Try.”

“He holds himself to a high standard and expects others to perform at the same level he does. When they fail to meet that standard, he becomes frustrated and angry with them. Whether that’s in academics, hero training, study habits, gear maintenance, or anything else he comes across. Kid doesn’t really do *anything* like his classmates,” Toshinori said thoughtfully. “He doesn’t really do normal.”

“So he has a hyper fixation on perfection then,” Naomasa mused. “What does he do when he doesn’t meet his own standards?”

Toshinori knows this unfortunate answer. Knows it in the way the kid had thrown explosion after explosion at him even when it was ripping his muscles up. How he had been so unwilling to compromise in working with Midoriya and how it looked as if he’d *lost* a fight with himself when he had worked with Midoriya after. He’s seen it in the way the kid had refused to accept his win at the Festival. The shaky way he’d reacted to losing to Midoriya during the first exercise- as if his entire world had been destroyed.

“He breaks himself,” Toshinori said uneasily. The panic attack after young Midoriya won in their very first exercise. Lashing out when he won the Sport’s Festival because he hadn’t won it the way he thought

he should have. The ripped muscles and throwing himself in the way of Toshinori's attack in Final Semester exams. The excessive training leading up to the Licensing Exam before and after.

Toshinori had been trying to be encouraging. He'd been trying to pin the kid down to talk. To speak to him about how it was okay to take breaks. He'd been hoping that if 'All Might' said it was okay that maybe the kid would take the advice seriously.

So far all he did was fail.

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

He wanted to fill that silence with a more chipper spin. To assure his friend that Katsuki Bakugou was more than strong enough to withstand whatever petty harassment was going on, but... truth be told.

The idea that someone had been... someone had been... someone had... it made his blood boil. To deal with that type of treatment after everything else the kid has been through. To pile that on top of all the other shit the kid has had to deal with. It makes his stomach turn.

And for Naomasa of all people to be speaking on a harassment/stalking case with such an air. The same man who had no issue explaining difficult cases to him over drinks over the years. That same man was speaking to him with trepidation here.

Knowing that and not knowing the details of what had been done... it left a gaping hole in his chest wider than the one plunged through his lung. He swallowed hard as he tried to picture what those details might tell him.

What had been happening under his nose all this time.

His friend cleared his throat.

"...tell me. How do you think he'd react if I asked him to come forward about the harassment and stalking?"

Toshinori felt a headache coming on.

...

...

...

The same headache that now took hold of him as he stared down at the kid sleeping dead to the world on the Common Room couch. He wasn't good at this. Not even close. Three days he'd been mulling over how to approach Bakugou and he was no closer to figuring things out or knowing how to approach this.

It certainly hadn't helped that Bakugou turned the other way whenever he spotted him outside of classes. Toshinori couldn't figure it out. Ever since his last battle the kid had proven aloof from him and while Bakugou had always been determined to show him he could handle things by himself and could beat anything (including All Might), he'd always talked to him.

He had to wonder if his sickly form scared the kid. If seeing 'All Might' as Toshinori was too much. If Bakugou was disappointed to see him as this weak figure rather than the towering strength he'd been until that moment.

And if that was the case then would it matter to Bakugou what he had to say? Or would he be dismissed like the broken remnants of a hero he actually was. His student never had a problem with telling him off or making a stand.

It was actually admirable and refreshing if a bit baffling how completely unimpressed Bakugou seemed to be at his very existence. He'd not met someone quite like Bakugou before and even though the boy often caught him off guard and had him miss-stepping, it was easy to see what Midoriya saw in him.

There was an ever-burning spark- a resilience and anticipation to every challenge and each seemingly insurmountable situation. In all his years he'd never faced anyone, Villain or ally in training, who smiled so fiercely when facing him in battle (even a mock one).

"How do you think he'd react if I asked him to come forward about the harassment and stalking?"

Three days ago, he'd answered that question.

"He wouldn't come forward," Toshinori had told his oldest friend. "There isn't anything on this earth that could convince him to."

"Not even All Might?" His friend had asked, voice quiet and earnest in that way Toshinori was oh so familiar with. He'd laughed dry and hard at that, until it turned into a wracking cough that hurt his side and blood leaked down his chin.

“He wasn’t even impressed by me at my full glory,” Toshinori had confided in him.

“You sure about that?” Tsukauchi asked. “Because his dad says that you were his inspiration to be a hero. Refused to have anything to do with any other hero other than you. His dad even made him a jacket like you’re American one for his last birthday. According to his dad, he wears it around the house all the time.”

Toshinori doesn’t know what to say to that one.

The idea of young Bakugou wearing his jacket and gushing about him was so against the ingrained image he had of the boy. The one who’d declared that he would become a better hero than him after that first exercise. The kid who’d looked at him with such wariness and disdain when he’d asked to speak with him in private what feels like another lifetime ago [though in reality he knows it’s only been a few months, just before they left for that blasted camping trip.]

He could hardly fit this piece into the puzzle that was Katsuki Bakugou.

“I’m just asking you to try, Toshi. Talk to him. Let him know that you’ll back him up if he goes public with this. Best Jeanist will back him up. I’ll back him up. Let him know that he won’t be alone and that we can make sure that the harassment stops. We might be able to turn public opinion with this. Make sure some of these people get put behind bars. Ensure this doesn’t happen to any other students.”

“He won’t want to be painted as a victim,” Toshinori warned.

“The whole continent thinks he’s either a Villain or a Victim, Toshi, at this point there’s no recovering his public image. What we’re trying to recover is his freedom.”

Toshinori frowned into the phone.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if Katsuki Bakugou ever wants to be able to travel safely outside of UA without an escort then we need to bring this shit to light.”

“You can’t be serious?” Toshinori found himself standing from his chair. “Is it... how bad is this, really? I know you said you couldn’t go into detail, but...”

It wasn't like Naomasa to exaggerate.

There was a long silence on the phone, faintly he could hear his friend clicking his pen in agitation, debating with himself what was safe to say and what was not.

"Do you remember your first civilian loss?"

Of course, he did.

A little girl who'd been bullied and harassed. A bit younger than his students. It had been going on for a long time before Toshinori was on the scene. She'd lost control of her quirk and ended up accidentally killing one of her tormentors. She used her quirk to end her own life that day and he hadn't... there hadn't been any way to stop her.

Slowly the truth of the harassment had come out and it had been... awful.

The details of that case still haunted him.

"Yes," he says the answer they both know.

"It's worse, Toshi, it's so much worse."

He finds himself breathing through his nose. His taxed single lung working overtime as he tries to picture what 'worse' could possibly mean in a harassment case.

'Harassment and stalking,' he reminds himself.

"Do we know who the stalker is?" Toshinori asks instead of letting his mind wander too deep into that pit hole.

There's silence on the other end which means that he does know and that Toshinori isn't going to like the answer. Which also means that there's a heavy chance Toshinori has *met* or *heard* of them.

"I think if you consider it for a few minutes then the answer will be obvious. Though narrowing it down from there, you probably won't be successful," Naomasa says, being as cryptic as always. Though both of them have been tapped on a phoneline before and the results of their own carelessness left them both haunted.

The obvious answer is the League of Villains. Though the cryptic words suggest it wasn't Shigaraki or Kurogiri. One of the lesser villains on board. He shudders. Stalking was... it was an odd crime. He wants

to ask how Naomasa even knows about the stalking. Because he wouldn't be speaking to Toshinori if Bakugou himself had come forward about it and quite frankly the idea of Bakugou coming forward is ludicrous. Boy has so much pride he might as well BE the deadly sin. He rages with such ferocity against any label he deems weak that it is unhealthy.

Which means that there's other evidence that's popped up that's lead Naomasa to this and anything that would point in this direction has to be damnable to deviate Naomasa from a case like the LOV. Not that his friend doesn't care... but to try to balance a harassment case with a criminal case instead of pawning it off?

All the red flags are waving and Toshinori feels like the fool holding a single broken white flag on the other side of the battlefield with no chance to either dive into the battle or run from it.

"I can't promise he'll listen to me," Toshinori says instead of trying to get a clearer answer from the man. "And I don't like going in knowing so little, but I'll speak with him."

He hangs up the phone.

Three days.

Three days of trying to catch a feral cat that was pissed at him and seemed more inclined and intent to throw itself off a cliff than be within ten feet of him. Every attempt on Toshinori's part was a dumpster fire and even asking young Midoriya's advice on how to talk to Bakugou had proved fruitless.

"Sorry... I don't... I mean... If you honestly think asking me that question is a good idea, then your kind of screwed."

"That's fair."

So yes. Technically speaking this was cheating.

Pulling a Nezu, if you will, but gosh if he doesn't feel *guilty* about it but the kid hadn't given him a choice in the matter. Overhearing that his query was passed out on the couch in an empty building and feeling unwell- in other words, unable to run away from him, was a bit too good of a golden opportunity to pass up.

It was an odd sight.

The tough kid who tore away from him at every chance. Who stomped and glared and hunched his shoulders and loudly proclaimed his opposition... curled against the couch at an awkward angle. Looking...

...

Relaxed wasn't quite the right word.

No one who looked so exhausted even in sleep could look 'relaxed.' One leg dangling off of the couch, ankle turned in a way he would be feeling once he woke. Shoes still on. Bag dropped on the ground carelessly. So unlike his student. He had his arm under him acting as a pillow, face dug into the nook of the couch cushion and his own skin. Sprawled out in a way that said the kid had only barely made it on the couch before he was out.

Toshinori gently removes Bakugou's shoes. Adjusting him further on the couch so that he could rest more comfortably. Kid doesn't so much as twitch. Dead to the world in a fashion that would be worrying if his chest wasn't moving up and down against his hand. His belt is digging into the boy's skin, Toshinori can see the way the metal has left a small cut across the explosive blonde's hip so he unclasps it and pulls it off as carefully as possible, setting it beside his shoes.

He finds a blanket draped over a couch on the other side of the common space. It has animal print on it so more likely than not it belongs to Ashido. He tucks that around the kid, trying his best to make him as comfortable as possible.

If anything, it only makes it all worse.

Bakugou looks so young here. Tuckered out and wrapped in a blanket.

He wished he was better at his.

Maybe if he'd spent more time over the years really interacting with people. If he hadn't worked himself into an early retirement... he has no regrets. He'd created an era of peace for a time and while he hates that he's no longer to be that symbol, he doesn't regret what he's achieved.

Even if it has come at the cost of his ability to communicate with the ones that he's become close to in the here and now.

Toshinori made himself a hot cup of tea and settled down for the long

haul with his teacher's book, popping it open to his last place and sipping on the steaming liquid as he waited for the tuckered out blonde to wake up on his own.

Kugo uses his shoulders to erect the last of the training dummies into place. The towering obstacles they must rescue their civilians from should make for a fun and challenging endeavor for the kids-

For the heroes-in-training.

For professional young students learning to work a dangerous job for their future career and should be treated as such. Not like children. Because that's disrespectful. And babying young heroes is what got him denied a spot on the UA staff last year. So yes, young adults... not children.

Kugo still added the color-coding to the poles.

Just because it was practical and not at all because the kids... the young heroes might like to see their hero costume colors on their poles. It's was recognition of who they would be out in the field. Nothing more.

He wiped the sweat from his brow and stood proudly in front of his work. It had been annoying how hard it was to get the chance to teach the young heroes and the contract the Hero Public Safety Commission had forced him to sign to not coddle the kids in any way and to treat them as adults.

'This is a test to ensure they are ready to go out onto the field, Gang Orca, an assessment after a steep failure on their parts to prove they are ready.'

Which he thought was quite harsh and unnecessary.

Each kid... each hero in training who'd showed up on his door had proven to want to be here and to want to put %100 effort into taking this next step in the right direction. Dedication and passion in most every face. Dogged determination in the last one.

Kugo frowned.

Exhausted, dogged determination in the last one.

“Gang Orca!”

The familiar voice made his eyebrows scrunch. In all the years he'd known that voice, it had never called him by his hero title outside of on the field. Dokka, also known as Pro-Hero Coalmine. He was an old classmate. His smoke quirk and forever ash-stained costume and skin were as familiar to him as the smell of Tsunagu's hair gel and jeans.

He turned, planning to greet the man with his normal shoulder nudge, but paused.

There was no ash.

The hero was clean, near sparkingly so, and the normal trail of smoke that tended to linger at his pores was nowhere to be seen. The man wore a smile that was too big. Nothing like the small pleased one he was familiar with.

Wary, Kugo eyed the man.

“What brings you to the Takoba Stadium?” Kugo asked, keeping his voice neutral.

The smile faltered a bit, but it refused to fall.

He moved his back leg a foot back, moving subtly into the first stance of defensive block in case this man tried anything. If this was supposed to be an imitation of his friend, then it was a very poor one. The eyes tracked him, following his movements and there seemed to be recognition there- a familiarity with Kugo's fighting style.

Hands went up in a placating way.

“Here for my mandatory sessions is all, Gang Orca!” The man said easily. Saying his Pro name again. “A stipulation of keeping my license!”

“What?” Kugo straightened, but only a little. Everything about this person in front of him was wrong.

“A coworker of mine in the office got lung cancer,” the smile nearly fell then, but he kept up. “My fault, I fu... I messed up bad this time. I can't take this back. Their undergoing cancer treatment right now and as far as I know the treatment seems to be going well...” the tension

sits between them as they both know that it might not. That the Pro might die because of Dokka. It must be tearing the man apart. "...but because of that I've come under investigation by the HPSC and I have to undergo By-Product Quirk Safety Training and Therapy sessions."

Kugo considers this... looking at his friend again before he speaks.

"Doesn't it..." Kugo searched the lines of his friend's body. The tension there. The stiff way he held himself and the tight lines along his face. "Have you released your smoke yet today? It hurts you to keep it inside like that."

"It's fine," Dokka grit his teeth, baring that smile still.

Kugo felt unsettled.

He couldn't even begin to imagine what it meant that Dokka had unintentionally hurt one of his friends in such a lasting, possibly fatal way. It wasn't like making a mistake on the field. This was one that had the man simply been more careful about exposing his smoke to other people, could have been avoidable.

The man had probably been wondering who else he could have caused unintentional damage to. He knows Dokka had trained for a long time to ensure civilians didn't inhale his smoke unintentionally during rescue. He knows Dokka has always taken precautions like standing downwind of people. Six feet apart.

Smoke rises. The man had designed his costume to force all the smoke along his body to go up as much as possible and for a few years there as trainees, everyone thought he should go with the Hero name; Furnace because of that.

For someone to still have gotten cancer from Dokka's quirk, it meant the man either slipped up - gotten lazy about being careful, or the person who got cancer must have been 'close-close' to him.

Kugo gestured to the field.

"Let loose, the kids won't be here until tomorrow and you should get as much of that stuff out of your pores as possible."

Dokka's eyes looked at the field wistfully, but they were quickly diverted to the other side of the stadium. Kugo's eyes followed his friends to see a woman standing rigged at the outskirts, by a doorway.

Her face was pinched. A real pencil of a woman in a suit so sharp it looked as if it was designed to cut. It was the woman who'd been meeting up with one of his kids... one of his trainees.

"Has she been helping you?" Kugo asked.

His friend's face did an odd twist.

"She makes sure I won't slip up again," Dokka says with such exhaustion and resignation that it makes Kugo's neck ache in how he twists it to look at his friend. That had sounded very ominous.

"And how does she do that?" he asked.

Dokka shoots him one of those smiles that aren't his again and Kugo feels all sorts of alarm bells going off now.

"She has a quirk that reminds you every time you slip up that you are slipping," Dokka said, rubbing the back of his head. "It's... *very* effective."

Kugo folded his arms as he looked at the woman and back at his friend.

"How does the quirk remind you?" Kugo asked, suspicion in his voice.

Dokka patted Kugo's arm in a fond manner.

"Always watching out for me, aren't you, big guy?" The joke was one repeated often. As Dokka himself was considered a hero on the larger side. All muscles and standing at six" four. In just the same manner that Dokka loved to irritate Tsunagu by reminding the man that he was the 'little one' in their class. A dangerous game considering what Tsunagu could do with the man's own clothes.

"It's just a warning system," Dokka said tiredly. "You can ignore it if you want to."

Funnily enough, that didn't lessen the wariness he felt in his heart.

Dokka began to move away, but there was one thing Kugo needed to know.

"Why are you calling me by my Pro title?" Kugo called out.

Dokka stilled.

“To create a habit of professionalism,” Dokka said, shrugging as he continued walking away. “Carving bad habits out and putting forward your best face.” Dokka half turned, flashing that fake smile again. Too wide and not reaching his friends eyes. “It’s all for the best.”

This last part is said quietly even as his friend turns around and marches towards the woman waiting at the entrance of the stadium’s upper offices. As if repeating it enough times will make it true.

Kugo’s not sure what to say or how to respond to an answer like that.

It’s not like Dokka.

Dokka has never really cared about his rank or image before. It’s why despite consecutively being in the top 100 of heroes due to his quirk and efficiency, he’d never purposefully drawn attention to himself. He’s never cared much for formal events or taking things too seriously. Another thing that irked Tsunagu.

Dokka had never wanted to hit the big 10. He’d been more than happy to have a small territory to protect. No real ambition or goals. Just a job he loved. It was one of the reasons that while he was a friend, a classmate, he wasn’t like Kugo or Tsunagu. They used each other to push and strive to be better every day, to widen their territories, protect more and more people.

Perhaps if he and Tsunagu kept in contact with him...

No.

There was no point in wallowing in the past. No way that this mess could have been avoided. Dokka was a good man and a good Pro. This was an unfortunate event that the Hero Public Safety Commission wanted to make sure didn’t occur again, is all.

Kugo looks once more at the woman, at her stiff face.

It’s not someone he can imagine being a Therapist to his friend or a child. She doesn’t really look like she knows what the word ‘kind’ means. He shakes his head hard. That’s a judgmental thought and he knows it.

How many people misjudged Kugo himself? Every. Single. Day. How many times had he been voted the hero who ‘looked most like a Villain?’ Despite years of trying to dissuade that image.

Hound Dog at UA too. The man was a brilliant Councilor for the school. Slits for eyes and a row of teeth sharp enough to snap a man in two. How many articles had he read with the Media questioning the man's abilities simply based on his mutation?

Kugo turns back to his pillars.

He probably should have tied the rescue mannequins to the top of the poles before he erected them.

Chin held high. One fist clenched. Feet apart for balance- ready for a fight. Her lips were pursed as she scanned the ground. Tsukauchi watched in fascination as she seemed to tick off his subordinates on some sort of mental scoreboard. She was actively *looking* for the strongest opponent.

Her eyes landed on him.

They narrowed into slits as her stance changed from aggressive to predatory. He tensed as he had the odd instinct that screamed at him to turn from her. That if it came down to a physical altercation, this tiny woman who- according to his files was a model with no background in combat, would most assuredly win.

He straightened, dismissing the odd sensation. Tsukauchi wasn't foolish enough to underestimate anyone though. He gestured to one of his more experienced officers to follow him into the office with them. He activated his quirk as he let Mitsuki Bakugou enter the room first, not willing to put his back to her when so many of his alarm bells were going off.

This was not normal.

As the woman marched into his office, Tsukauchi could see the lines along her body. Full confidence. She expected this to go her way. There was no stiffness here. She was completely relaxed in what she was doing even though this was a high stress situation.

She took *his* chair.

Tsukauchi frowned at her crossed her legs. A need for control. She

didn't just want to dominate the conversation; she wanted every aspect of this situation to be in her favor. She wanted to intimidate Tsukauchi on a primal level. To force him to acknowledge that she was in control from start to finish.

His own eyes narrowed.

This was dangerous. This need for control was a poisonous, malicious trait and it wasn't often the he found himself faced against this kind of predator like behavior outside of a high stakes Villain interrogation. Suddenly the defensive way both her child and husband held themselves took on a much more frightening picture. Their wariness and the careful way they spoke made much more sense.

Tsukauchi played ball, carefully sitting in one of his guest chairs as he maintained eye contact with Mitsuki Bakugou, keeping his own posture relaxed.

"How can I help you, madam?"

He kept his voice light, tucked away all the exhaustion he felt with all of his years of experience. This was not a conversation he'd allow his body to betray him for. Her lines shifted in a way that was not unlike a dog raising its hackles. Touches of maroon. Betrayal. Like her husband had only week or so ago when he'd spoken to him, but the reason, the tones were all off.

This wasn't an old wound like Masaru.

These were fresh. Shallow.

Her actions here were made on a moment's notice.

"You're investigating my child," Mitsuki spat. "Wrack your brain for a minute to figure out what I want to know."

Tsukauchi took his time stirring cream into his coffee, watching as her lines thinned as her patience frayed at the edges. Just before they snapped and shifted, he set the cup down.

"Katsuki Bakugou is involved in an ongoing investigation, but he is not suspected of any crimes, rather, we think he might be the key to plans the LOV has or had before Kamino." Tsukauchi told her. "The information your husband agreed to provide us has been vital in moving the case forward."

Mitsuki leaned forward, some of her casualness melting away.

“Using phone records that I, the sole person whose name is on the phone bill, did not provide,” Mitsuki said sweetly.

Normally Tsukauchi didn't mind playing the subtle back and forth. Passive aggressive tactics often led to a variety of revealing information about the target, but he felt... no, he knew such tactics would not go well here.

“That is true,” Tsukauchi took a sip of his coffee, watching as she leaned back, arms spreading out and shoulders straightening. A show of dominance. “But as it was your husband who chose to provide us the information, there's hardly a court of law you could take this to that would see issue with this. Especially provided what the phone records entail.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Her lines going from casual to... not tense. It was... anticipation. She liked a good fight.

“Wanting to protect my child from the backlash of harassment is hardly cause for a judge to falter in condemning you and robbing you of your position, Detective,” Mitsuki said without missing a beat. “The law is clearly on my side in this case.”

“So you were well aware of the harassment then?” Tsukauchi pressed.

“Of course, including the fact that there were a number of heroes going after my son. Was I supposed to trust the police to keep this under wraps when even Pro-heroes were targeting my child?”

“Hm...” Tsukauchi murmured under his breath. Despite himself he was a bit impressed with the woman in front of him. She was implying that she could press charges against the Pro's who'd been involved. Implying that she could make this a media disaster. It was too bad for her that Tsukauchi himself had every intention of raking the Pros across the coals himself. “That's a very motherly stance to uphold. Protective. Loving. Attentive.”

He watched as her lines shrink in for a split second, glowing a furious white. Suspicion, wariness, she knew he was gearing up for a trap with his words. Her eyes widened, but it wasn't in surprise, it was to take him in, take his every moon in.

"I protect my own," she said slowly. "Katsuki is *my* child. I'll do whatever it takes to keep him out of the hands of those who would do him harm."

There it was again.

My child.

My boy.

My husband.

The inflection of possession in her tone- that these were not two individual people, but rather, people who belonged to her. Each time she'd said *my* her lines had sparked green. Possessive. Controlling. Mine.

"Odd choice of words," Tsukauchi said, pulling one of his files closer to him. "Not at all like the choice of words you used on May 8th, the day of the Sport's Festival."

Surprise. Confusion. Irritation. Her lines thickened as she settled in.

She was no longer amused by the aspect of a fight.

"And what words were those?" She arched an eyebrow.

Challenging. Probing. She wanted him to show her his hand.

She had no idea just how many hands he had.

Tsukauchi flipped his file open- one of his thinner files for his Katsuki Bakugou case, but that didn't say much.

"I can't tell you how ashamed I am of you right now. You've embarrassed us on national television. Your father and I will be spending the next year making up for your mistakes. I hope you're fucking proud of yourself."

Her lips thin.

She shrugs but that casualness is less natural.

"He's prideful to a fault." Mitsuki stared him straight in the eye. "His lack of control and his temper tantrums cost him his reputation before he even got to debut his hero name. We all knew this was coming. I've told him time and time again he can't act that way."

No recognition.

She's defensive, but not of her own actions. Of Katsuki's. She expects condemnation of her son by Tsukauchi himself. There's no repentance or guilt over this text she'd sent her son. Of how this must have affected him after the award ceremony fiasco. None whatsoever.

Tsukauchi breathes through his nose.

There had been no investigation into the Sport's Festival incident. Something that had, quite frankly, boggled his mind. Just another tick off of the long list of 'Red Flags' surrounding Katsuki Bakugou. It was almost as if the kid had a quirk on him that caused everyone to ignore his mistreatment.

This also confirmed that Mitsuki hadn't stopped them from seeing her son's phone records because of her own, numerous abusive texts that had been sent over the ten-month period he'd requested. She'd done it solely to stop them from seeing the harassment by other people.

Still...

"Katsuki never replied to your text," he says it casually, taking his eyes off of her to pretend to read off the file. He knows what's in it. He's read it over a dozen times. "Of course, Katsuki doesn't really seem to reply to any of your texts."

He's probing and implying and he watches with a touch of fascination as she seems to catch onto that immediately. She never shifts to the stance of one that's been cornered though. Her body language all screams that she thinks she's still in control.

"He's a disrespectful brat," she shrugs and smiles- it's a model's smile. Practiced. Easy. Meant to lull him into a peaceful, submissive mindset. He sees her lines though. The way there's sparks of red along her throat and mouth. "He never listens. Always causing me problems."

She casually shifts the blame from herself.

It's a theme, a pattern, that he's becoming familiar with.

"Third in your class?" Tsukauchi reads off, eyes meeting hers. **"Is UA finally putting you in your place then?"**

"Katsuki's never been less than first in his class for anything. He's naturally gifted at everything he does and everything he tries comes

easy to him. That also comes with an insufferable ego though and I have to keep him in check. Remind him that he still has to work hard to earn what's given to him."

Keep him in check.

Another mark of control. Another act of possession.

Not only that- but her perception doesn't match up with what All Might had told him or with what he's seen. Not in person or at the Sport's Festival. There was nothing that seemed to be easy for the kid. He'd fought hard to earn third place in the first stage of the event. He'd led his group in the second stage well and had taken second place there. Then the one on one fights... Nothing about anything Tsukauchi had seen of the boy looked as if it had come easy to him.

And this text... taunting your child who clearly cared deeply about being a top student in this way. Being third at a top school was phenomenal. The mocking tones here... the dismissive way it regards his achievements. And that line again...

'Putting you in your place.'

Just in this conversation alone she'd implied how she had to monitor him. Keep him on a type of leash. The controlling aspects were shining through. Things he'd suspected in the texts he's read, but it was always different to see a case like this come alive when meeting the people in person.

"But tell me, Detective," Mitsuki asked, watching him closely. She was growing impatient. Her lines tinged in anger and for the first time since the start of all this he blankly realized that there had been none when she first entered the premises. An act of anger. "Why are you questioning me about texts I sent? What does any of this have to do with the LOV case and my son's involvement in this?"

There she goes again.

That's the... third? Time she'd implied that her son was being negatively viewed in this case despite his own assurances that Katsuki was a victim here.

His 'involvement' in it.

As if the kid had a choice in the matter.

“I’m simply pointing out that for a woman so concerned with her son’s well being when it comes to outside influences, you yourself seem intent on breaking your kid down until there’s only ash left,” Tsukauchi gave his own smile.

The lines exploded.

The patience she’d been holding a deft control over snapped and a vicious type of fury wrapped around her entire body. Indignation. Disbelief. A self-righteousness so thick it no longer appeared as a line, but a cloak.

The casualness was cast away as if it were lint on her shoulder.

Tsukauchi felt his officer shift uncertainly.

All the while, Mitsuki hadn’t moved and the smile she wore still sat on her face just as naturally as before.

“Oh?” The simple word sounded sweet, but the emotions coming off of it bled danger. “I am not some feeble minded, spineless fool, and for all his faults, neither is Katsuki. We’ve always communicated in this manner.” Tsukauchi wants to point out that it’s not a form of communication if Katsuki isn’t texting her back, but refrains. “I raised my boy to be strong. A few words to remind him to behave are just that. Words. Are you trying to suggesting that a few checks to ensure he’s doing the right thing and staying on track are abusive?”

“It wasn’t a suggestion. There’s enough texts here that prove gaslighting, victim blaming, and emotional abuse that I don’t need to imply or suggest anything.”

She laughed.

It was... Tsukauchi blinked as he took in her lines, witnessing the genuine humor.

“Gaslighting?” Mitsuku trilled, the sound of mirth in her voice even as she spoke. “You people are all the same. Throwing the word abuse around as if it has any merit when you label every spanking or ‘mean’ word as if it’s a horrific case. Treating discipline as if I’ve held his hands over a stove top and burned him.”

His heart skips a beat over the suggestion, but he can tell from her lines that the idea of doing ‘that’ at least is unthinkable. She genuinely believes her words though. She thinks those texts are there to help

Katsuki.

Tsukuachi blinks.

Dismissive. Amused. Unhurried.

“Have you met my son?” Mitsuki demands. “He isn’t the type of child were you can simply tell him what he’s doing wrong and expect him to get it. He’s a stubborn child and he needs reinforcement.”

Confidence. Experience.

“Can you explain what you mean by that?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Katsuki needs to be kept in check,” she repeated herself. Her voice and inflections... her assured body language. This was *her* truth. This was what she genuinely believed. “He has a dangerous quirk and he rarely shows restraint in it. One of these days he’s going to really hurt someone and it will be nobodies fault but his own.” She tapped the table harshly. “But he’s *my* kid and it’s been my job these past sixteen years to make sure that he knows better. It’s my job to TEACH him how to treat others and not to let his arrogance get the best of him.”

And she’d done it.

Every line along her body said that she held that as truth and that she’d done everything in her power to ensure it. To Mitsuki Bakugou, her son was truly all the things she claimed he was.

He thought of all the texts Katsuki hadn’t responded to.

Everything Masaru had told him.

Everything All Might had told him.

Tsukauchi had the foreboding feeling that the stuff this woman was saying had been repeated so often and so viciously that the kid believed it all.

‘A hyper fixation on perfection.’

Fuck.

“And how exactly do you go about teaching him?” Tsukauchi demanded.

Her eyes glinted. The first signs of defensiveness coming in. The red of

her eyes narrowed to slits. That same self-righteous fury shining through. There was no longer any signs of enjoyment in this back and forth. A deep seeded line showing now.

This one was self-made on the subconscious level.

Old.

It was resentment. Not directed at him. An association with the topic at hand.

“What exactly did those phone records reveal about my son?” Mitsuki made her own demand, forcefully diverting the topic. The idle chat was done. She was no longer willing to ‘humor him’ the lines said. She wanted answers.

“It didn’t reveal anything about your son,” Tsukauchi answered honestly.

Katsuki Bakugou didn’t text people. The primary use of his data had been listening to music on his phone. The data they’d garnered stated that he kept up with a few social media platforms through his phone. A few minor games he’d played. There were a few scenery pictures. A picture of a menu he’d taken.

All of which had stopped after the Internship with Best Jeanist.

There were a couple of texts sparingly sent to classmates about times and places, but those texts all but disappeared by time the infamous camping trip had occurred. Katsuki Bakugou had withdrawn all activities on his phone.

“The value of the phone is the information it proves about the men and women who harassed Katsuki. The people who stalked him. Unfortunately, because of the sensitivity of the case involving your son, I can’t go into specifics, but you have the same information available to you, do you not? You’ve stated that you’ve already gone through them.”

Mitsuki huffed.

“You’re not at liberty to discuss the case? That’s the excuse you’re really trying to pull on me? After you connived your way into my home and manipulated my husband, that’s the best you’ve got?”

Tsukauchi watched as distrust and suspicion ran rampant on the

woman.

She glared at him.

“What do you plan on doing with this information then?” Her nails clicked against the table. “How will those decisions affect Katsuki.”

“People will be held accountable for their actions,” Tsukauchi said point blank. “These types of cases are difficult to handle. As each individual act of harassment is nearly impossible to do anything about. We can legally only punish those individuals who committed multiple acts of harassment and that cuts down the people we can officially go after by ninety-five percent. However, if we took it to a court of law as a package- ”

“Absolutely not.”

Tsukauchi paused.

Alarm. Shock. An intense desire to stifle. Smother. Douse.

“Pardon?” Tsukauchi asked carefully.

Mitsuki folded her arms. Then, as if realizing the action, she unfolded them. Braced her shoulders back and stuck out her chin. All while maintaining eye contact.

Defensive. Something to hide. Posturing. Aggression.

An odd reaction to Tsukauchi merely speaking of what could happen if they go forward to protect her son.

The lines turned a shade of green.

Agitation. Concern. What kind of concern? Not parental concern. Internal. Concern for herself.

“Bringing this to court will only make the harassment public. Katsuki doesn’t need anymore negative publicity following him around.”

A lie.

Even Mitsuki doesn’t believe that one. Up until this point the woman had believed her words, spoke them as her truth. Now she was directly lying. He wondered, as he always did, if she could see the tiniest flicks of silver that appeared in his pupils at a direct lie.

It had taken her a while to reach the end of her own delusions.

“But it could also put a stop to the majority of the harassment,” Tsukauchi pointed out, reasonably. “And there are a number of people involved in this case that have proven to be dangerous. Your son has been threatened. Multiple times, by multiple people, in multiple different ways.”

A derisive move of the lips. She was sneering at him.

Defenses still raised. Finally becoming tense. She’s having a harder time maneuvering in this conversation. She’s unsettled. That green line is growing deeper. Pulsing orange to indicate a simmering resentment, sparks of red for anger.

It’s still not *for* Katsuki and Tsukauchi can’t help but feel more alarmed by that.

“Don’t take me for a fool Detective, and don’t overdramatize the situation,” Mitsuki sighs. If it wasn’t for Tsukauchi’s quirk, she would still appear as cool and collected as the moment she walked into this room. “It’s a ridiculous amount of texts, but at the end of the day, its just words.”

Oh.

She doesn’t know.

She one hundred percent believes it’s just words in those texts. Which means that she didn’t dive deep enough to see the pictures. The in person stalking. She hadn’t found the League of Villains texts- Magne’s texts. He reads it in her lines. The way those words fall from her lips with ease. She’s downplaying the texts but using false information.

She glimpsed at the texts.

But she didn’t fully go through them.

That begged the question though; what was she hiding so vehemently if it wasn’t her own negligence?

Her own texts of emotional abuse and gaslighting were nothing to her.

The harassment against Katsuki appeared to be something she thought others would dramatize, but for the most part, was something of little consequence for either her, Katsuki, or the people involved.

She doesn't know about the LOV stalking.

So what WAS it? What was she hiding? What did Mitsuki Bakugou consider to be a danger?

“”The media will go out of their way,” Mitsuki continues, and Tsukauchi has to force his thoughts and quirk to focus on her, to file away that thought. “...to ensure this leaked phone number is blown up to extremes. Just as you’ve done this evening.” She looks at him pointedly, as if she is chastising a child and is clearly in the right. “You think they’ll highlight the ‘mean’ words said to my son? No. They’ll plaster photos of him acting like a fucking psychotic lunatic at the awards ceremony. They’ll call out all of his flaws across the nation again. Highlight how he fought that twig of a girl at the festival. These extras will do everything in their power to make the media shitshow we’re dealing with ten times worth.”

‘We’re dealing with.’

The problem isn't the issues that Katsuki is dealing with. No. It's what Mitsuki is dealing with. She's worried about another round of bad media that 'she' has to deal with. He thinks quick as he leans back in his seat.

“I imagine,” he said casually as he keeps his eyes on the way her hands are calm. There's no shaking. No nerves. No crease to her eye from worry. “...that things have been difficult for you and your husband during this time, especially with your type of business.”

There's a certain lack of lines here.

Protective ones. Motherly ones. Concerned ones. Mitsuki Bakugou lacks the lines he's seen on most mothers whose child is in danger or hurt. All the lines Masaru Bakugou had possessed, actually, none of them are so much as surfacing. Not in the tiniest sliver.

She raises an eyebrow at him.

“We have taken hefty hits since the Sport's Festival, but that isn't my concern.”

Truth. Lie.

“My concern here is making sure that Katsuki doesn't destroy his career.”

Partial truth.

She'd flared up in anger at Katsuki there. The concern was for the career Katsuki can have not for Katsuki himself.

Her and Masaru's business had taken hefty hits because of Katsuki's bad publicity during the Sport's festival. Katsuki needs to succeed and to stay out of the media in order for the business to recover.

This case would be one bad media circus right after another.

She isn't concerned about how that will affect her son, she's worried how it will affect her job.

She glances at the files on his desk, no doubt wondering which one was her son's, before they wander over to the small one still in his hands. He wonders how she would react if she knew this was the file on her and that there were five or six folders here connected to her son's case that were some of the thickest.

He certainly wouldn't be enlightening her.

Not after this conversation.

His officer taps the side of his job, looking at him earnestly. Tsukauchi checks the time. Damn. He's been actively using his quirk for a while now. On top of his exhaustion. If he deactivates it now, he's going to be spending the next several hours in the med bay for overuse.

He nods.

Wrapping it up then.

"We will take those concerns into consideration," Tsukauchi told her as he stood up.

She didn't mirror him.

"Do you think we're done?" She asked, her tone angry. He lines, for once, mirroring that. "You think I haven't noticed how you haven't actually given me jack shit about what's going on with my kid? You think I didn't notice the way you were maneuvering me to give you information. This little meeting isn't finished until I say it is. Now sit your ass back down."

The office he'd put on stand by was shaking his head more obviously now. Tsukauchi didn't miss the way those red irises zeroes in on the

man before turning back to him. He sat down anyways and heard the audible” sigh leave the man.

“So you want to interrogate me then?” He kept the amusement out of his voice. Folding one knee over the other as he leaned back and gestured with his hands. “By all means.”

“Why did you feel the need to shove your nose in my family’s business after Katsuki was returned to us?” Mitsuki demanded.

She’d stood now, hands leaning on the desk. Dominance. Intimidation Aggression.

“I felt that understanding *why* they’d targeted the kid in the first place would be important. Garnering his phone records was just one piece of the puzzle,” Tsukauchi said.

“You know why he was targeting,” Mitsuki spat, her ‘hackles’ were raising. She was agitated. She thought he was playing dumb. Purposefully diverting her.

“Why do you think he was targeted?” Tsukauchi asked, this time allowing the amusement to filter in. Set her off. Make her misstep.

“The Sport’s Festival, of course, don’t play games with me Answer the fucking question.”

“Are you aware of the part your son played in the USJ attack?” Tsukauchi asked.

He had a feeling she didn’t.

She didn’t strike him as the type to ask her son what happened or to listen if he tried to tell her.

“The part my son... are you suggesting he was involved in that shit?” She hissed.

She assumed he’d meant in a negative way again.

She thought he was implying that Katsuki had been part of the Villains side.

“Quite involved,” Tsukauchi chirped. “Katsuki Bakugou recognized Kurogiri’s significance in the attack as the means for the Villain’s escape. He saved the life of Izuku Midoriya and took the Villain down all in one move. Quite impressive. He did so directly in front of

Shigaraki too. Now... due to the Nomu's involvement, Katsuki was very nearly killed, but it is a very strong possibility that it was this moment and not the Sport's Festival when the Katsuki Bakugou was put on the League of Villains radar."

The anger simmered.

There was a touch of disbelief in her lines. Wariness. There was also pride there. A confirmation of a long held expectation. Complete confidence that this was how it was supposed to be.

The only question was what she held disbelief for and what she had confidence in.

"Katsuki saved Izuku?" Mitsuki asked.

Her voice was softer than it had been up until this point.

Tsukauchi blinked, trying to keep the surprise from his own face. *That* was the part she was in disbelief over?

She had confidence in Katsuki's skills, in his ability to BE a hero.

But not in his ability to protect or save others.

That aligned with everything so far in a scary sort of way. So far she hadn't put forward any doubt about the kid's abilities or skills; only his personality. She seemed to be under the belief that she needed to fix him. Keep him under her control.

"Yes," Tsukauchi said, curious despite himself. "According to a report I received from All Might, Katsuki threw himself in front of an attack aimed at Izuku Midoriya during their Semester Exam as well. It's why he ended up unconscious." He leaned back even further to better look at the surprised woman in the eye. "I'm surprised you didn't know about it."

Did she truly know nothing about her son?

He's assumed on some level that even if Katsuki never responded to his mother's texts that they still *talked* when he was home.

"Did he not tell you about his exam?"

She shifted. One hand cocked on her hip. Aggression. Eyes turning away from him. Guilt. Her lines thickened. A violet color. Tsukauchi had sparked a memory of some kind then. Something to do with the

exam.

“What exactly does this have to do with anything?” Mitsuki grit out. Denial. Deflection. “This isn’t important.” Lie. To herself. Delusion. She was feeling guilty about something she’d done when the exam was brought up between her and Katsuki. “So the Villains saw my son kicking their asses then, and you think that’s what caused them to focus on him?”

Diversion away from herself.

“I believe that’s what made them pay attention when they watched the Sport’s Festival, yes, if they hadn’t already been familiar with the kid, then they might not have taken to him the way they did.”

She hummed.

She was distracted. Still deep in thought. All her lines saying that she was deep in her own head.

“It still doesn’t change anything,” Mitsuki murmured under her breath. She was building her walls up again. The self-delusion growing stronger by the second. “He was still targeting for his aggression.”

Tsukauchi felt no guilt about destroying that self-delusion.

“Actually, they didn’t target him because of his *reaction* to being put in chains.” Tsukauchi doesn’t reach for the Magne file. He doesn’t tell Mitsuki about the text messaged observations the Villain had sent to Katsuki about how much the kid looked depressed and lonely. How ostracized the kid was. The offering of protection and friendship that had been implied.

“And how would you know that?” Mitsuki’s tone has taken an edge to it. It lacks the lines of knowledge though. She hadn’t stumbled upon or recognized Magne. Not surprising. She doesn’t believe him. She thinks he’s bullshitting.

“They noticed him because of his talent at the USJ, but they targeted him when UA decided to chain the child to the ceremony stage because they saw an *opportunity*. They preyed on a kid they knew was hurting.”

Mitsuki snorted.

Disbelief. Amusement. There was something about his words she

thought was outrageous. The idea that the League would target a child because they were hurt? Or...

“Hurting?” Mitsuki smirks. “You know nothing about Katsuki if that’s what you think.”

Does she...

Does she think her child wouldn’t be hurt by what happened?

Her lines are dismissive. Confident.

She does.

She has full confidence that Katsuki can’t be hurt. That no matter what happens or how he’s treated that he can’t be and wouldn’t be hurt for being *chained* and *muzzled*. Things click into place for him.

The demand for perfection from her son.

The expectation of it.

The controlling nature.

The insistence that her son’s emotions needed to be contained, his personality needed to be watched. That her son was dangerous. While in the same breath maintaining that he could not be broken. Complete confidence that he could not get hurt; emotionally or physical or mentally.

She didn’t seem to see her son as human.

She didn’t see him as capable of being harmed- only capable of harming others.

She saw this case as a waste of time because she didn’t think any of this could hurt Katsuki. She saw this case as the potential to hurt her and her husband though because of the bad publicity it would draw to their company. She saw Katsuki as having the potential to draw positive attention to their business if he kept his head down and because he would undoubtedly become a powerful hero in the future. If only he didn’t have his personality.

He kept his face blank even as he mentally scrambled to put all his pieces together for what that entailed. What Masaru’s pieces meant when added to that larger picture. The intense guilt Masaru had felt for ‘failing’ to protect his son.

“Regardless of how you feel about your son’s emotional fortitude, the case files point in this direction.” Tsukauchi said sharply. He mentally cursed for the slip up in tone. People were much more prone to picking up on the tone words are spoken in rather than the words themselves.

Her defenses were up again. The hand on her hip fisted. Lines snapped along her body. The façade of casualness completely gone.

“So tell me then, oh wise *man* who insists he knows my child better than I do,” Mitsuki bristles, voice soft and venomous. “This case is all well and good, but you’ll still need my son’s cooperation to go forward. My son would never be so weak willed and spineless to agree to play victim for *your* cause.” Her smirk widened into something that might be called a grin if there wasn’t a glint go vindication and control in her eyes. “Mansplain to me how you’re going to get my kid to be the poster child for your dramatic saga of victimhood.”

Triumph ran through her body to thick it was more like a shawl then lines.

She had him, her body language said.

She’d won.

“No child of mine would be so pathetic.”

Annnnnnnnnnnnd he no longer had to question why Katsuki Bakugou hadn’t come forward and asked for help.

One thing had become absolutely clear though.

Tsukauchi stood from his own chair, allowing his height and relaxed stance to say how he felt about the situation. Hands in pockets. Not worried at all about anything Mitsuki Bakugou thought she could do in this situation.

“Luckily for us,” Tsukauchi said easily. “Your son is a hero. He might not come forward for himself, but there’s enough of a threat here that if we spin things to imply his classmates have the potential to be in danger...”

He smirked himself as he saw her lines falter.

Her confidence wilts a bit.

“...he won't ever admit it, but Katsuki Bakugou will put himself on top of the fire to ensure no one else is burned.”

Not that Tsukauchi planned to let the kid within ten feet of the flames, but she didn't need to know that.

“I won't allow it,” Mitsuki gritted out. The woman walked out of his office, body stiff, but lined with determination and a need to stamp down on this situation. Which means she'll go to the source.

He turned to the guard, his quirk telling him that the man was unsettled by what he'd overheard. Stiff. Uncomfortable. Eyes wide. He wants a solution but doesn't have one. There are lines along his body that screams a need to protect.

Good man.

“I want you to get in contact with Nezu,” Tsukauchi said sharply. “Tell him what you heard here. I want whatever Mitsuki Bakugou is about to pull at UA to be fully recorded and someone on standby to step in. I think we're about to get evidence that will ensure my case against her goes through. Do NOT under any circumstances let Mitsuki take her son off of campus grounds. I don't care what UA has to tell her. Get it done.”

The guard nodded. His lines suggesting that he would do everything in his power to make sure Tsukauchi's orders were followed.

“Good. Now... one last thing. Catch me.”

Tsukauchi de-activated his quirk.

Deficit

Chapter Summary

Kirishima tells Aizawa about what he witnessed

Katsuki contemplates the many ways his body tries to kill him

The entire conversation All Might had in his head goes COMPLETELY differently than he expected because bless his big damaged heart, All Might's a bit of an idiot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 19: Deficit

Eijirou refuses to look at anything on the web that has Bakugou's name. He won't do it. It makes him sick to his stomach. He's thankful that Bakugou doesn't really do social media. It's not his thing. It's hard to even get him to return text messages let alone get a tiktok account. They'd all but stopped asking him to get involved with this kind of stuff after Kamino. After they'd spotted some of the stuff coming into the woodworks on various platforms.

They had all still been getting to know each other during the sport's festival. He'd known, of course, that what they were saying about Bakugou wasn't great, but the guy was pretty confident and didn't seem bothered by it at all. Besides, he'd been obsessing over his own rather mixed bag of feedback over the Sport's Festival.

Articles like: *A Dime a Dozen?* Detailing his fight with Tetsutetsu and how there was an overabundance of strength-centered heroes. How the two of them would only add to the growing number of hard-hitting quirks rather than broadening the variety and abilities of teams on the field. It had gone into criticizing UA for not teaching them how to be more versatile with their quirks, noting that Bakugou had what most would consider a straightforward quirk but that the volatile student had used his quirk in every way but what was expected of him. How clear it was that UA wasn't the one who taught the Winner of the Sport's Festival these principles.

Lack of Strategy in the UA Festival First Years.

That one had struck a cord in him. It had been a play by play of all of his mistakes and his classmates. Analyzing their footwork and their ability to plan. Even Todoroki had been thoroughly roasted for his brute strength strategy in the one on one fights.

He hadn't really paid attention to what people were saying online after that. Eijirou knew it wasn't healthy for him. He was well aware how easy it was to be discouraged and he let what he thought other people thought of him get the best of his mental demons too much to want to purposefully go down that road.

So he hadn't looked.

He knows the others sort of felt the same way, though Kaminari was a masochist that would read every article with his name on it even if it was only the vaguest of mentions. Which was super worrying and Ashido lectured him about it all the time, especially when he got into one of his moods because of it.

Now though...

"Everyone does... Everyone knows."

Katsuki had sounded so tired. So resigned.

Which meant that Katsuki had been seeing this shit.

Eijirou would have done things differently if he'd known. No matter how painful, if he knew Bakugou was looking at that awful stuff then he would have looked. He would have... they *all* would have told him not to.

They would have kept tabs on him like they did for Kaminari. Made sure he didn't get stuck in his head too bad or take what the media said too seriously. As long as Eijirou had known him though, Katsuki had resisted the idea of social media. Dismissed getting a Twitter account like it was a vile threat. Rolled his eyes at the idea of investing his time in Pinterest or Tumblr or Reddit or Quora or Instagram. Even the Hero Networks like [H]er(0)es, ResAn (Rescue Analysis), BB (Bombard B-Listers) had received only a mild, irritated scoff from his best friend.

They'd thought they could find Bakugou's *thing* if they only kept throwing out suggestions. The guy didn't do facetime or texts or

phone calls or even online gaming groups or Discord. Their little squad had been forced to face facts and admit that Bakugou wasn't that type of guy.

Of course, while they'd resented it at the start of the year, now they were grateful.

The guy, the second year? Third year? Eijirou's not sure, but the awful shit he was saying... the way it had been like an avalanche. How one person had spoken and it was like... like he'd given everyone else the liberty to be assholes. Like they'd all been holding it in, waiting for one person to say something and then it was free game.

What was worse though was the *feel* of it.

Bakugou hadn't acted surprised. There hadn't been a single dubious, incredulous, indignant, taken off guard line on the guy's body or in his eyes. No. He'd been ready- expectant. And the way he talked... the way he'd defended Eijirou- all of them.

"They don't have anything to do with what I've done. You want to go after me? Fine. I can take it. You go after anyone else and I'll bury you."

That was not the first time their schoolmates had gone after Bakugou.

He's pretty sure it's not even the second or third time.

Everything about that interaction screamed 'habitual.'

Eijirou wracks his brain as he tries to figure when the ever living fuck this could happen though. Bakugou's schedule is tight. Its scarily tight. And any free time the guy does allow himself is with him or the squad.

So *when* did this become a thing?

How?

"Okay," Aizawa says after Eijirou has told him what happened and his thoughts on the matter.

"Okay?" Eijirou bulks at the deadpan expression on his teachers face. "Like as in: 'Okay, I'm totally going to hand out punishments and get to the bottom of this' or as in 'Okay, you're being dramatic, but if it continues we'll actually do something about it? Okay' Because to be frank, teach, I'm not really a reading subtext kind of guy and I'm

kinda freaking out here.”

“Do you trust me?” Sensei asked, those tired eyes looking hard.

“Of course!”

“Then you already know which ‘okay’ it is.”

Eijirou lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Okay then.”

When someone was sick, a person’s sense of taste and smell tended to be the first to go for a number of reasons. One of which was the way certain viruses attacked the nervous system. Here’s the thing though; Katsuki’s chemical makeup was all kinds of fucked up. It worked on a completely different level than most humans.

The nitroglycerin wasn’t just a component of his sweat. That shit was being pumped in his body like it was nobody’s business. His body compensated for the lowering of his blood pressure (his body’s attempts to kill him) with an insane amount of adrenaline and stress endorphins.

And as they say; everything that is psychological is biological.

Its why medicine was often used in the treatment of those who were suffering from mental disorders. Their *chemistry* was off.

Katsuki’s chemistry was constantly putting him in fight or flight mode. He needed to work out to get all the extra energy out. He needed to be active. He needed to be combative; a fight to get the energy out or running to get it out. It was one or the other.

But here’s the second part of this particular shitshow.

The constant threat of if his blood pressure drops he could die doesn’t go away just because his body is trying to compensate for it. No. He has to be careful about hydration and nutrition. If Katsuki doesn’t drink enough or keep to a strict diet then his blood pressure might drop and he could die. If Katsuki takes the wrong kind of medicine then it could drop his blood pressure and he could die.

Because of his vastly different composition in concerns to chemicals and the way they interacted with his body, it also meant that the way it interacted with his nervous system was different.

Basically, Katsuki's sense of smell and taste was shit.

Which is why he liked his food spicy and why he wasn't a fan of sweets. There was nothing more annoying than seeing people sniffing the air of fresh-baked cookies that Katsuki couldn't smell. Humming as they would pop one in their mouth. Delighting in the taste. All Katsuki tasted when he bit into a cookie was the fucking texture. Soft sometimes, moldable if it was still hot, crumbly if it was not.

Life had cheated him out of the taste of cookies.

His dad lamented this loss every Winter on his behalf.

More than that though...There is a reason why Katsuki has to keep his routine so strict.

Katsuki works hard to hide the drawbacks to his quirk. He's pretty sure that not even Deku knows. Of course, that particular fight to keep information locked down always ended with him destroying any notebooks of Deku's that had his name in it. The shitty nerd's tendency to overanalyze Katsuki's quirk and fighting style could never end in anything good and it was just one more way Deku tended to stalk him.

[He's proven right when Deku copies his moves in their very first fight by throwing Katsuki over his shoulder like that. He's proven right again when Deku copies Katsuki's entire fighting style for his Shoot Style. When he'd told Deku to make that power his own, he hadn't meant fucking copy Katsuki verbatim. Fucking mocking piece of shit. Oh hey, I know you worked years to create this style specifically for you and your quirk, let me just *take it* for my own use and impress everyone.]

[Katsuki's not bitter.]

The guys that followed him around in middle school had a tendency to take *any* of the notebooks Deku wrote though. Katsuki always made sure Deku got those ones back. He always got weird stares, looks that said; 'why are you being hypocritical?' Why are you defending Deku here but then go and blow up his other ones?

He never says why.

He knows what it looks like.

He doesn't have to explain himself to anyone. And it's not like anyone believes him when he tries to say what the problem is. That Deku doesn't respect privacy. That when Katsuki makes a line, Deku hops over it with a shit-eating grin and a knowing look in his eyes.

'I hate you.'

'I hate you too.'

He thinks that's the moment... the moment in the bathroom when Deku went from being innocent in his stepping over Katsuki's boundaries to doing it on purpose. To watching Katsuki as he slowly starts to snap and when the anger between them went from resentful and hurt to bitter and spiteful.

He wonders, sometimes, if he were to go back in time what he would have done differently. If he could have forced himself to shut down and turn everything off like he's learned to do now. If he could have tapped down on feeling so claustrophobic at the mall and the people around them. If he could have stifled his need to getaway. Blanked out. Forced himself to go numb and just nod along like he does whenever his mom- the Hag forces him to do social things now.

Instead of trying and failing to explain that he gets overwhelmed when he's around people for too long. If he could have just... shut his fucking mouth. If he could have just lied to Deku. Done what his mom wants and just... not been himself.

But he hadn't.

And whatever kinship had still been between them at that point had been absolutely destroyed. Deku had spent the next several years isolated from everyone. Katsuki had spent the next several years being overwhelmed by everything.

It had the benefit of Deku not finding out though.

The first time it had happened, he was five. One year after his quirk had manifested. The day had been hot and he'd been showing off his explosions left and right and Katsuki hadn't thought much of it. Hadn't thought about it as he showed them off during recess nor after school. Sparks going off and the fire running along his fingers as it faded away.

He hadn't thought.

He'd walked through his front door and waved at his dad and then there had been... a weird, sudden feeling of cold. Then dizziness. And then the floor rushing up to meet him. Apparently, his eyes had rolled into the back of his head so suddenly that his dad hadn't been able to get there in time.

Low blood pressure.

Which was, apparently, normally maintained by Katsuki's absurd amount of adrenaline running through his veins but could be compromised.

By an *obnoxious* amount of things.

Like not drinking enough water.

Not maintaining a very healthy diet. Apparently, a lack of certain nutrients could cause him to die way faster than the average kid.

Heatstroke. Which meant the very thing that made his quirk strong was also something that could kill Katsuki.

There was a lot of medicines that could mess up his precarious chemical balance which meant it would be safer to have Quirk Healers than medicinal remedies (meaning more expensive).

Alcohol was an absolute no go when he gets older.

Because Katsuki went basically from fine to 'severe hypotension' very quickly and the ability of this low blood pressure to accidentally kill him if not taken care of properly was much higher than he would ever admit to anyone.

And it was fine.

Because Katsuki knew how to take care of himself.

He kept to a strict diet to ensure his nutrients weren't off. Made sure to keep hydrated. Made sure not to skip meals (he'd gotten a bit worse at that, sue him). He made sure to go to bed early and to get enough sleep- again, extenuating circumstances withheld.

This shitty head cold isn't exactly the first and it usually occurs when he's not paying enough attention to his own health. A direct consequence of slacking that he despises and that always rankles deep

within his soul.

It fucking sucks- that Katsuki can't be irresponsible for any reason or he'll suffer severe, instant repercussions for it.

"The reason your son can't seem to sleep at night is chemical-based. The same chemicals that save him from the low blood pressure nitroglycerin also cause his stress levels and adrenalin to rise."

Masaru hummed, Katsuki tilting slightly to lean against him as his heart pounds rapidly but his eyes feel heavy.

"So what do we do? He can't keep this up."

The fighting, Katsuki knows is what he means, the yelling and screaming and arguments with mom. The late, sleepless nights that cause tension in the household. Katsuki moving about at night, irritating his mother. Then passing out just before he needs to go to school.

"I recommend investing in a treadmill at home. If he's to sleep then he needs to get all of that adrenalin out of his system and the only way to safely do that is for him to be as active as possible as long as possible. Clubs or sports are a great idea, but it has to be more routine than that. Not just a few days out of the week, but *every day*."

"And what happens if it's not done every day?" His dad asks, sounding tired.

"You have what's happening now." The man answered simply, gesturing to Katsuki's wilting form even as his feet tap against the examination table. "The overabundance of adrenaline is making it hard for him to function. Your son is constantly in fight or flight mode. His body is basically telling him that he needs to be *reacting right now* 24/7. Since the medicine we know of would cause more harm than good, the only real way to ensure his mental and physical health is to keep him in physically intense activities, keep up with hydration and a strict diet, and allow him an outlet if the day didn't wear him out enough."

The Doctor gestured at him.

"Right now he hasn't properly run off the adrenaline even though his body desperately needs rest. The consequences of that being Adrenal fatigue unique to his biology. Try having him jog for a few miles and

then let him sleep. We'll have to try a few things out but I have full confidence we can design a safe way to balance those dangerous chemicals of his."

"And running him ragged... that's the only way?" His dad had asked, pained.

The Doctor looked both of them in the eye.

"Your son's quirk isn't an emitter type. It's a mutation. It affects the entirety of his biology. There's no easy fix for that. He will *always* be dealing with the excessive chemicals in his body. To attempt to lower those chemicals would cause his blood pressure to drop and would kill him. It is a good thing he wants to be a hero, hopefully, he doesn't grow out of that because I don't know too many other career field choices where he could survive with a quirk like his."

Katsuki hasn't explained any of this to anyone.

His quirk is strong.

His quirk is powerful and versatile and for some reason, no one really thinks that it has drawbacks. And Katsuki doesn't plan on enlightening anyone to these things anytime soon. However...

The drawbacks of his quirk are hitting him hard.

He's falling back into that dangerous territory and those moments of missed time are starting to affect him more and more. The lack of sleep. The panic attacks. The additional remedial courses. The therapy sessions and associations.

Katsuki has to do better.

Katsuki has to be better.

He can't slack on taking care of himself just because he's tired. Katsuki can't afford to have a day where he's irresponsible. Today was completely unacceptable. That shitshow in class. Ponytail calling him out. That couldn't happen again.

Because if there's one lesson that he's learned above all else it's that Katsuki's worth as a human being is equal to what he puts out. Not what he puts in.

It doesn't matter how much he works, and it doesn't matter how much he suffers. It doesn't matter how many breaks he takes or if he refrains from taking any at all. It doesn't matter what he's good at and what he's bad at.

All that matters, all that's ever mattered, are the results.

Mistakes, as he's learned over and over and over and over again, will not be tolerated. Katsuki doesn't have the option to opt out. He doesn't have the option to turn things down. He can't say no. He doesn't have the option of a bad day.

He's got a damn head cold and he's been sent back to the dorms.

But Katsuki *knows*.

He knows the consequences even if everyone else plays dumb. Even if they insist that he should rest and 'feel better.' Katsuki will pay for taking a break. That's how it's always been. They're going to remind him that he'd missed class. They're going to remind him that he's falling behind just like Icy hot did when they first started the remedial classes. They're going to hound him about the stuff he missed, about how lazy he's being.

It's these thoughts that rattle around in his head as he blinks tiredly awake and reaches out blindly for his phone. The fog still sits heavy in his head as he stares blankly at the phone's screen telling him it's mid-afternoon. He feels as if he's only just turned over and there's a building resentment for time itself as he pulls the phone close to his chest and closes his eyes, the lids feel heavy and his arms feel weak like the phone is much heavier than it should and the room should be more firm where it's fuzzy.

It's as he scrunches up on himself that he feels it.

There's somebody else in the room with him.

Katsuki jerks, sitting up and looking around the room wildly. The phone falls from his limp grasp as he tries to orientate himself. The idea of someone catching him sleeping like an alarm going off in his head.

He should have gone up to his room.

He should have been more responsible.

Guilt twists his insides so strong it feels more like a pit even as he *knows* it's a stupid emotion to feel. Plenty of his classmates have fallen asleep on the couch. There's no *reason* to feel this way but...

He should have...

He catches All Might's form staring at him in concern and its like his brain goes off-line. He pushes back until he's leaning heavily against the couch, staring at the man blankly as he fumbles to figure out *what* the man is doing here.

He looks around for Deku.

None of his classmates are here though. Everyone is in class so unless All Might has developed a weird habit of hanging out in Class 1A's common room, he's here specifically for Katsuki. Dread pools in his stomach and he's reminded of the intervention All Might had just after their final semester exam before the summer camp.

Katsuki has kept his promise though.

Even though he'd wanted to confront Deku in a more confrontational way he hadn't.

He hadn't spoken to Deku at the camp. He'd kept his distance from the nerd before and after he was kidnapped. The only thing he's even said to him at the licensing exam was moderately positive... for Katsuki anyways. The few interactions they've had he hasn't gotten in Deku's way at all. All he has done is push Deku away when he tries to get close to him.

Did Deku tell All Might that he knows?

He'd told the nerd he wouldn't say anything to anyone else. And Deku knows him. Blast the shitty nerd to hell, but they *know* each other. Neither of them have ever spoken to others about what happens when they talk. Their peaceful moments stay between them. And that's sort of just... always been a thing.

It's... weird to think about.

Weirder that he feels the tiniest bit of betrayal that Deku had said anything. Its usually Deku's *actions* that get Katsuki in trouble. Not what Deku says. This is dumb. Deku's dumb. He should know Katsuki would never say anything to anyone about his secrets.

All Might probably wanted to make sure for himself though. This secret that Deku and All Might have with each other. The fact that All Might had somehow *gifted* his quirk to quirkless Deku.

That's not something someone like Katsuki should know.

All Might wouldn't even admit that Deku was special to him back when he and Aizawa had come to talk about the dorms. That was nothing compared to the secret Katsuki had unintentionally become apart of. A quirk that could be passed on... not even an ordinary quirk. An enhancement quirk for speed and strength- possibly more, considering all that All Might has done in his career.

The Symbol of Peace.

What did he think of Katsuki? The person who had become the Symbol of Destruction? The person who'd very nearly killed him in their training while perfecting his AP shot after forcing his retirement a month before that. The man's lecture about making sure to take breaks during his training and to not push himself had felt as if he'd wanted...

Katsuki knew how the man pushed Deku.

The way Deku's arms were constantly breaking. The bruised black limbs straining against the power given to him. In the same breath All Might encouraged Deku to go all out, to push past his limits, he told Katsuki to not fight.

It felt as if All Might didn't really want him to become a hero. Granted, it was the gentlest way anyone had ever tried and coming from just about anyone else, he would think it genuinely was a lecture on taking care of himself. But coming from All Might?

'You're not the chosen one,' his lecture said. 'You never will be. So why don't you give up here? You don't fit what's needed to be a hero.'

The man who pushed everyone to go plus ultra. Who encouraged Deku's suicidal, gung ho nonsense. The same man who'd looked at Katsuki at the award ceremony and had said: *'This is too much.'* The man who, during their final exam, had looked at Katsuki fighting and had told him to stop fighting him.

The Sludge Villain incident... pulling him out of that mess.

The Nomu at the USJ, pushing him out of the way, taking the hit.

Kamino.

There was no one else, not even Deku, who All Might had been forced to save over and over again since they met well over a year ago. Who had paid the price for saving Katsuki over and over again.

If All Might had known Katsuki would be the end of his career, would he have saved Katsuki that first time? No one had known he was there. All Might could have just... walked away and no one would have ever known.

Was Katsuki worth *all of this*?!

Katsuki's worth as a human being is equal to what he puts out.

He's always known that.

But now he's at a deficit.

He's taken so much from so many that he's not sure he can ever close that gap now. And there's no one he's taken more from than the man sitting next to him. And that fact makes his skin crawl, an anxiousness that is nearly overwhelming.

"Young Bakugou!" All Might says *warmly*. "I was sorry to hear you weren't feeling well. I know it's not ideal, but there are a few things we need to talk about if you're up for it."

The man clinks his tea down to look him in the eye though Katsuki can't help but be drawn away to the emaciated body. The way the shirt the man's wearing doesn't quite fit even though he's finally stopped wearing the clothes for his hero form.

They don't seem to make clothes that thin.

Not for people as tall as All Might is.

Because usually if you're that tall and that thin, it means you're dying.

"Don't have a choice about it, do I?" Katsuki mutters.

He hates that everyone phrases it like it IS a choice.

As if Katsuki could just say 'nah, I'm good' and All Might would fuck off forever more.

All Might's hands tap his legs absentmindedly as he stares at Katsuki,

the seemingly ever present wrinkle of concern between his brow deepening.

“It’s imperative that I speak to you,” All Might admits. “But it is a heavy conversation. We can speak when you feel better, if you like, but it has to be sooner rather than later.” The man gives him a pointed look. “And you have proven to be rather elusive as of late.”

Katsuki grunts as he sits up fully, trying to rub the fog from his mind.

“It’s not my secret to tell,” Katsuki assures him, steadfast. He wants to make himself clear in this. He would never betray All Might or Deku like that. If anyone ever learns their secret, it won’t be from him. Katsuki finally looks the man in the face. “I promise I won’t say a word about you passing on your power to Deku.”

All Might, the Symbol of Peace, sputters.

“I...! That’s...! How did you...!?”

The man coughs harshly as Katsuki stares blankly at the man. All Might’s spitting blood onto his pants as he wheezes, trying to get his breathing under control as he’s holding up one finger to gesture for Katsuki to ‘give him a minute.’ It reminds him of the conversation they’d had before the camping trip. The blood is unnerving, the twitching fake smile more so. And then it hits him.

All might has no fucking clue Deku let the cat out of the bag.

Katsuki’s not sure if he should be more annoyed at Deku for divulging secrets or at the clueless adult bleeding out in front of him. He’s almost impressed how fucking dumb these two are. He is worrying assured that Deku hadn’t thrown him under the bus though. It doesn’t... it shouldn’t matter to him what Deku does.

Still... that leaves him to deal with All might because Katsuki had just thrown himself under the fucking bus. He has to at least make sure Deku’s dumb ass is covered. Swear to fuck its like Deku does this shit on purpose. If it wasn’t so obvious he lacks the common sense of self preservation he’d be more pissed about it. As it stands he’s just mildly annoyed that he’s in this position again.

“You passed your power on to someone who was completely unprepared for it,” Katsuki deadpans as he stares the man down. “Deku was quirkless, a wet noodle could have competed against him in a competition of strength and won, did you think no one would

know?"

"It's a late-blooming quirk," All Might tries, wiping the blood from his mouth with a handkerchief. "Young Midoriya's body was not yet mature enough to handle his quirk."

Katsuki blinks at the man.

"...has that actually worked on anyone?"

All Might wilts.

"You're the first person to really..." All Might gestures vaguely.

That can't be right.

"What about Inko?" Katsuki demands.

All Might shakes his head.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

"Deku's dad has a *fire* quirk," Katsuki feels the need to point out. "Quirks are genetic. They can mutate but not beyond *recognition*."

"Young Midoriya says he convinced her the quirk must have come from somewhere down the line," All Might tells him quietly. "You know how he is about quirks and analyzing them. Apparently, Mrs. Midoriya was adopted. "

Katsuki twitches.

'Must be nice to have a mom that will believe literal bullshit coming out of your mouth,' Katsuki thinks, vaguely horrified at the implications being presented to him.

"You get it's only a matter of time..." Katsuki trails off.

The world is full of extras.

But they ain't brain dead Neanderthals.

All Might shrugs.

"I'm not so sure about that," the man is smiling a bit as he stares at Katsuki. "No one knows young Midoriya's past like you do. No one knows *Midoriya* like you do, young Bakugou. No one else is in quite so

unique position as to be able to put the pieces together as you have.”

Katsuki looks away.

“Whatever. I ain’t going to tell anyone, anything. It isn’t my business to spread.” He looks at All Might through his bangs. “I swear that on my life.”

The man sighs in relief, shoulders sagging in a way that suggests that they’ve been tense for a long, long time.

“That is very good to hear. Though I find myself unsurprised by your fortitude and dedication. You’ve more than proven your trustworthiness.”

Katsuki chokes on his own spit.

He wheezes, his surprised laugh wrenched from him.

He hadn’t been aware that All Might could joke. It catches him off guard and Katsuki hugs himself as he presses all the air from his lungs to better get ahold of himself. He gives All Might a crooked grin as he pulls himself back together.

What an asshole.

Honestly, that was the type of backhanded joke he expected from Deku with his false, mocking praise he liked to throw around. Maybe it wasn’t just Deku being affected by All Might after all. Maybe a few things had rubbed off on All Might after spending so much time with the nerd.

“Right,” Katsuki wheezed out. “I can sign a contract or... I don’t know... speak an oath under quirk if you want.” All Might was eyeing him now with uncertainty. “I get it.” Katsuki says and fuck is his voice rough right now. “You don’t have to put on airs. I know I’m not the kind of person you want knowing a secret like this.”

All Might’s frown deepens.

“I meant what I said,” All Might said slowly. “And what sort of person do you think you are, young Bakugou?”

His amusement drained from him.

He hated this word game. He never won this game. No matter how he answered these kinds of questions, it seemed as if he never had the

right answer. And he didn't appreciate the dishonesty.

Deku was always like that too.

Being openly mocking and then acting innocent about it.

'It's because your amazing!' In his mocking voice and then his true feelings under his breath. *'If only his personality wasn't such shit.'*

Of course, he never said the second part quite like that.

It was always in ways like: *if only he weren't so mean, if only he didn't speak so rough, if only he was nicer- if only, if only, if only, if only, if only, if only, if only.*

If only Kacchan wasn't Kacchan.

Jokes on Deku. Katsuki's well on his way to doing just that.

"Don't play games," Katsuki hissed. "What do you need me to do? I'll do it."

That *damn* look.

The big eyes and the way All Might was leaning forward.

"I need you to answer my question," All Might said firmly. "What sort of person do you think you are?"

Katsuki grit his teeth.

"I'm not what people *want* in a hero," Katsuki curled his hands into a fist as he turned away from those pinpricks of blue glittering at him. "I'm not what *you* look at as a hero."

Katsuki *lacked* something.

Something vital that his mom had been looking for, for a very long time. He had the nagging sense that she didn't quite know what that something was either. But they both knew it wasn't there.

"On the contrary, young Bakugou," All Might said softly. "You have exactly what it takes to be a hero. Passion. Tenacity. A hard work ethic and an unbreakable will. In concerns to skill, you far surpass many of your classmates in knowledge and ability. More than any of that though is your spirit. It is intimidating just how brightly it burns and how far it spreads. I often find myself trying to instill that kind of

spirit in young Midoriya.”

Katsuki was quiet for a long moment as he tried to take in those words, staring at the man who was smiling at him in that genuine way, all the fakeness from before gone. The smile that made Katsuki feel compelled to believe it.

He swallowed.

“But...?”

“But what?” All Might asked.

“There’s always a but.” Katsuki says firmly.

“As a hero, there is no ‘but.’” All Might told him. “You will go on to be a brilliant hero who stops many Villains and who wins many battles. There’s nothing more to that. If that is the type of hero you want to be then you are on that fast track to becoming the best as that kind of a hero.”

Katsuki frowned.

The man was manipulating him in someway here. He could feel it in his bones. The sharp glint in All Might’s eye knew that Katsuki knew that too. Fuck.

He bit the bait anyways.

“That type of hero?” Katsuki asked dryly.

No buts about it his ass. There was definitely a but even if the word was being avoided. Fuck.

“Young Midoriya, for instance,” All Might said with a ‘here is the lecture I’ve been waiting to give for so long’ hand gesture. Katsuki mentally groaned and sunk into the couch. “He is someone who will prioritize the person he is rescuing, mind and body, over everything else. A catastrophe going on in the background. A Villain that needs to be stopped. To Midoriya, his world revolves around that person he’s rescuing while in the midst of rescuing them. Which is fantastic. Young Midoriya will be fine as that type of hero.”

All Might paused, looking at Katsuki pointedly.

“So you’re saying I need to be better about saving people,” Katsuki said bluntly.

'Like Deku,' he thinks bitterly.

There was the 'but.'

"When young Todoroki goes into a situation," All Might said, completely bulldozing over Katsuki's words. "He uses his quirk to handle the environment around him first. He stops falling debris. He creates barriers. He stabilizes the environment around him. He too will be a fine hero who handles catastrophes the best among all other heroes. It is what he prioritizes."

"Speak plainly, All Might," Katsuki demands.

He's way too drained for this kind of mental back and forth.

"All of you focus on what is most important to you. You see the trees. Not the forest. There is a difference between being the best at what you do and being *the best*." All Might told him. "Everything you do as a hero is important. If you beat the Villain but people die then you didn't fully do your job," All Might looks pointedly at him. "However, if like young Midoriya you focus on rescuing everyone and making sure no one gets hurt then the Villain will escape to cause damage to others another day and on that day, you might be too far away or busy elsewhere to do anything about it. Or... like young Todoroki, you focus on the environment, stabilizing it to ensure the safest environment for both rescue and fighting, you neglect the rescue and fighting." All Might held up three fingers on his hand. "Prioritizing is what *most* heroes do."

'Oh.'

"But the best hero handles all three priorities with the same efficiency that a great hero handles one," Katsuki said slowly.

All Might beamed proudly at him.

"Exactly!" The man clapped his hands against his knees. "You still have much to learn, young Bakugou, but I have full confidence that you *will* learn them so there is no 'but' in this conversation. You *will* become one of the best."

His face felt hot.

Katsuki turned away from All Might, confused and flustered.

This didn't add up, but hard as he tried, he couldn't find the dark glint

that normally came with words like that hidden in his face or eyes. He couldn't find the strain most people had when they said things like that to him. He couldn't even find the expectation most people carried with them... the 'if you don't succeed, you'll be worthless' string that was synonymous with such proclamations.

Where was the anger? The hidden bitterness? Where was the underlying tone of deceit or mockery? Where was the resentment? He *knows its there*. It has to be.

Katsuki's like... 70% sure Kirishima only tried to be his friend at first as a challenge of manliness or fucking something else just as dumb. Befriending the big bad wolf as a way to prove something to himself or some other bullshit. He tries not to think about that too hard because it doesn't change the end result. Tries not to consider the idea that Katsuki might just have been that awful to try to be friends with that someone would have to challenge themselves to do something unpleasant to reach out to him the way Kirishima had.

He *knows* Kirishima dragged the others into the friendship even while he acknowledges that they are his friends now.

"There is a different issue we need to speak on though," All Might said, the lines on his face pulled tight. Katsuki tenses. "Detective Tsukauchi reached out to me about a case on his desk."

The whiplash is hard with that one.

"Huh?"

All Might grimaces.

"When you were kidnapped, a file was opened on you. They attained your phone records."

Katsuki begins to boil inside his own skin. The hot clammy feeling that's been taking hold all day despite his numerous checks for fever suddenly ramps up to a solid ten threatening to break the meter.

"What?" he croaks.

They know.

His muscles coil hard enough that he might as well be stone.

They know that Katsuki knew about the League of Villains. They know

Katsuki knew they were going to come and didn't say anything. They know...

He clutches at his chest, bending over to try to get his breath under control. His fingers feel hot and slick which isn't good. It means his nitroglycerin is overproducing. It's been too long since he's spark off the excess.

He's wearing his school uniform. The buttons are smooth under his finger. Small. White. Plain. Not at all how he likes buttons. He likes the large ones with textures and colors. His dad always makes a big deal out of adding the obnoxiously large ones to coats he designs for Katsuki cause he knows there his favorite. His dad always makes sure to make sure to use extra strong material to tie the buttons on so that Katsuki's rough fidgeting won't pull them off. As it stands, the small, fragile string that holds the little white button on is threatening to come off as Kastuki tugs at it to center himself in the here and now to not let himself float away.

A large hand touches his shoulder.

Katsuki jerks back. Slamming into the back of the couch as he stares at the gaunt face of All Might looking at him worriedly.

"You here with me?" All Might asked.

He nods.

If only barely.

All Might is on his hunches in front of him, his stretched out limbs looking awkward in a crouch. Katsuki stands both because the idea of not moving is stressing him out and to force All Might out of his position as well.

"What now?" Katsuki asks.

Because there has to be repercussions for this.

With All Might's retirement- that had been Katsuki's fault, but he hadn't done anything illegal. All the consequences were on a social level. Everyone knew what Katsuki had done. The punishment had been swift and heavy.

Hero Agencies barring him from working with them.

The Public Safety Commission forcing him into the therapy sessions and remedial courses.

Influencers making sure he wouldn't be able to work with certain groups.

Katsuki had been canceled to the best of the public's ability.

But *this*.

Katsuki had been told by *Villains* that they were coming for him. And yeah... Katsuki had thought that meant his home when he got back, he thought it was a civilian stalker, but he still hadn't told anyone. He hadn't said anything about the looming threat and because of that... because of that the camp had been attacked. People... students had been hospitalized. A Hero had been kidnapped and her quirk stripped from her.

Kamino had happened.

Acid sat at the back of his throat.

There wasn't anything to vomit up though. His hands shook as he ran them through his hair. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

"Young Bakugou!"

Katsuki looked up, stopping.

He'd been pacing.

All Might had his hands out, like he wanted to reach for him but had refrained.

"Both Tsukauchi and I want to make this as easy on you as possible," All Might said, his voice unsure as he looked Katsuki up and down. "I'm sorry that bringing this up has upset you so much."

Make *what* easy.

Fuck. Had he missed something? Had All Might told him what his punishment was while he was spaced out.

"What's going to happen now?" Katsuki asked again, trying to face whatever was ahead as... a shock ran through his leg. He almost looked down. His leg *hurt* and with an alarmed feeling running through him he realized that the ring had been shocking him this

whole time, but he hadn't *noticed*.

He flinches as it shocks him again, flaring the already irritated skin. He tries to keep as still as possible as he looks All Might in the eye. Doing so only seems to make his teacher more on edge though.

"We're going to do everything in our power to stop the harassment, of course," All Might says slowly. Like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Like that's the real issue in this situation.

"No." Katsuki shoots back, feeling his heart grow more frantic in his chest. "No, I mean, what's... how much did the Detective tell you? About the... about the messages?"

All Might's brow scrunches.

"I can't even begin to know the terrible things they might have sent to you. Tsukauchi told me that you've been receiving a barrage of phone calls, pictures, and text messages harassing, threatening and verbally abusing you. He said that you had stalkers as well. People who were following you around and taking pictures of you, tracking you... including someone from the LoV, He didn't go into detail on *anything* though as that would be a breach of privacy. He wants to speak to you though."

The shock that hit him this time had Katsuki raising his foot before he put it back down. His right foot remained planted as he stood on his tiptoes with his left, moving it around to try to alleviate the pain in the most subtle way he could.

Luckily, All Might never looked down, keeping eye contact with him as Katsuki tried to cope with the new information. So All Might knew but he didn't *know*. Not the true extent at least. And the Detective wanted to 'talk' to Katsuki.

He shivered despite feeling hot and clammy still.

Would he be charged with a crime then? Neglect to action or something like that? Neglect to inform? The lack of knowing was literally giving him heart palpitations. They'd take him to some interrogation room and they'd question him.

"When?" Katsuki demanded.

"Tsukauchi has to see to a few cases first, but as soon as possible," All Might told him. "But it can wait until you're ready. You don't have to

speak to him at all unless you are okay with it.”

It was very clear All Might didn’t actually know the content of those texts.

Though he knew the LoV had contacted him.

Katsuki’s fist was still clenched around his shirt over his chest. His breathing kept trying to match his rapidly beating heart so he let the hand drop.

They were going to pull him out of the hero course for this.

The media would salivate over this latest debacle.

It would be the last straw for the Public Safety Hero Commission too.

Probably.

“Hey, hey now,” All Might called out. “Listen to me. No one is going to push you to talk to him. I swear that on my title. No matter what you decide to do, I will support you. You have the full power of any influence I might still have backing you. I promise that.”

Katsuki shakes his head.

If he knew... if he knew he’d be swallowing those worlds.

All Might would be disappointed in him. Will be. When the extent of his involvement gets out.

The towering man braces Katsuki’s shoulders, squeezing lightly.

He needed... He needed to get out of here. It was so hard to *breathe*.

Large hands grab his own.

“Bakugou,” Katsuki’s hand is forcefully unclenched. Flattened. “I want you to feel my heart and try to match it, okay?”

His hand is pressed against a thin chest. It feels cold against his own hot skin. The beginning of ribs at the bottom of his palm. The heartbeat that thrums beneath his fingers feels barely there. Slow.

“The news outlets won’t ever tell you this because they don’t know,” All Might’s deep baritone told him calmly. “But my first year I refused to work with a Hero Agency as a side kick. I was still reeling from

losing my mentor, you see, and the idea of working with anyone at that time was inconceivable to me. So I struck out on my own!"

All Might grins at him.

It's an odd grin. One that he's never seen before and it throws him off guard.

"And I failed."

That weird thing remained; an edge of self-deprecation added.

"I created a back draft in my first fire rescue. Lost an elderly woman because I wasn't careful enough about my speed. My first catastrophe I handled I caused a barge to tip over because I panicked while rescuing a sinking ship next to it. Made the mistake of taking on a stealth mission in America... that did not end well."

All Might winked at him.

"There is a very good reason why I have no action figures featuring my first year as a hero. Though there are plenty of articles in America Magazines if you go back far enough."

The calm baritone was easy to focus on and soon enough Katsuki found himself focused entirely on it.

"I cut a much smaller figure back in the day, when I myself first received One For All. Gran Torino basically beat the muscles onto me." All Might laughed. "It would not have been an impressive figurine."

Katsuki felt calm, half leaning forward, staring at the carpet with All Might half hugging him.

"I eventually worked with Gran Torino full time and he helped me to craft the image I needed and to cover me any time I made a mistake. My point being that it's okay to need help and to be helped. I see much of myself in young Midoriya, but it is just as true that I see much of myself in you."

Katsuki pulled away.

He felt calmer now.

"How did you know to do that?" Katsuki asked.

All Might shrugged.

“It’s how my mentor would help me.”

“Gran Torino?”

The man shook his head, looking infinitely sad.

“Everyone gets overwhelmed,” All Might told him. “And everyone has their own way of coming down from that. Different coping mechanism and different ways we process emotions. I’m not... the best at it. Something else we have in common. Changing the topic and listening to a story that’s left field always helped. If someone just keeps asking me to calm down or tries to say soothing things to me it makes it worse. Takes me longer to get out of my own head when all the people around me are verbally reminding me I can’t calm down.”

Boney shoulders shrugged.

All Might pointed his thumb towards the doors.

“Want to go for a walk? I’ve never liked being inside when I feel like shit.”

Katsuki swallowed. He still felt like shit. His bones heavy in a way that only the adrenaline of their conversation had kept at bay. It was hard to focus and the hot clammy feeling had only gotten worse since they’d started talking but... but he wasn’t sure if this conversation would be offered if he turned it down now.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll tell you about my mentor and One For All’s history and maybe, if you’re comfortable, you can tell me a little more about what’s going on?”

Fucker was way too hopeful.

Katsuki shrugged, hunching his shoulders as he followed the retired hero out the front doors of UA’s dorms.

Chapter End Notes

Did All Might forget Katsuki is sick? Yes. Yes, he did.

Did I need to break this into two chapters?

Also yes.

Because I can't write concisely if my life literally depended on it.

Is Aizawa going to be royally pissed off when he finds out that his sick student is MISSING?

...

...

...

My Son

Chapter Summary

Aizawa has too many kids

All Might tries his best.

Mitsuki has come for her son

Chapter Notes

I can't begin to express how many times I rewrote the Mitsuki confrontation scene.

I just posted Social Media: Mayhem, a collection of scenes I deleted from Social Media: 101. I'll be posting chapters based around my attempts to write the Mitsuki confrontation in there if you want to take a peek at the writing process. I set it up as a Collection too so you can find it that way as well.

Chapter 20: My Son

It would be very convenient for him if a newspaper could inform Shota of all the things going on with his students right as he woke up so that Shota wouldn't be responsible for figuring out teenagers himself.

'Problem Child runs into dangerous Mafia boss first day Shota lets him out for Internships. Blames himself for circumstances out of his control and goes into a downward spiral of self-doubt.'

'Students are thrust into first field take down against Shota's recommendations only for Problem Child's downward spiral to be linked to it and thus detrimental to his mental health to pull him or the others out.'

'Trauma child being harassed behind Shota's back on campus where the child lives. For an unknown period of time.'

'YaoMomo groped by a fully grown man on her internship. Student

trapped said man's hand in a metal box, she'd created seconds after it happened, had been charged with sexual assault. Self-confidence issues he's been working to fix might be damaged again.'

The Newspaper would automatically appear before him, red ink highlighting 'shit got real while you were sleeping.' Blue ink to tell him 'priority mental breakdown here.' Yellow for all the things All Might fucked up behind his back. Purple for shit Nezu *planned* behind his back and didn't bother to inform him about until the last fucking second. And Green for the shit Villains were going to do to fuck up his day.

Black for everything else he needed to know.

All in easy to compartmentalize and handle columns with step-by-step instructions on how to handle them and numbers to call when he couldn't. He could read the newspaper with his breakfast and tea. 'Oh look, Mineta is toeing the line again. An internship with Mt. Lady is recommended.' 'Another bone broken... a thirty page essay on the medical aspects and repercussions of breaking bones... probably wouldn't change anything but the pain on Problem's child face would be worth it.' 'Oh, Kaminari has ADHD? Probably need to get him some additional help for that then.'

"What are you thinking about?" Hizashi asked him.

Shota blinked, looking up from the papers he was grading.

The man was staring at him, an amused look on his face. One black painted nail pointed down his lap.

'Oh.'

He'd been so distracted he'd tipped tea on his lap. He jerked the mug up, splashing more onto his lap and the table, wetting one of Iida's papers. He grimaced. Already knowing the scandalized look his student would give him when he handed the paper back.

He sighed heavily as he fixed the papers and set the tea down.

"I know I approved of Nezu's Dorm system, but the me of two months ago had no idea what the fuck he was getting into and I resent him for it."

Hizashi snorted.

“That bad, huh?” The man set aside his own English papers to give his friend his full attention. “What’s going on?”

The mission would be put in place in a few hours. Hizashi was already aware of that mess. He didn’t want to speak to his friend about YaoMomo’s situation because it felt as if it was a breech in privacy. Those sort of situations were... awful and intimate and it wasn’t his place to speak to anyone about it except his student to ensure she was okay.

“I need at least four clones of myself to handle what’s going on in a daily basis,” Aizawa muttered. “The student body has been harassing Bakugou *since the dorms were built*. I don’t even know where to begin with that.”

“Harassing how?”

“Don’t really know. Kirishima says students were blaming the kid for All Might’s retirement though. Said some other stuff too and that it had been going on since Kamino. I can give the kid who was the head of the bullying detention, but I don’t think that’s going to solve the issue, especially if its so widespread.”

Hizashi scratched the side of his nose in thought, his brows bunched up.

“Well, that’s all sorts of awful. Maybe we can talk to Nezu again about the mixed school trips and lesson plans again.”

“He already agreed that the separation between different fields at UA was causing conflict. He has plans in place for next semester. I’m not sure we could get him to move the date up faster than that,” Shota said doubtfully.

“Maybe,” Hizashi said, “the business teachers still resent us for UA hosting the Sport’s Festival and making their kids look foolish every year. We could talk to Nezu again about making it a volunteer basis for non-hero students.”

“I agree with his points though,” Shota cut him off. “If they are going to make their careers working with heroes then they need to know more about what its like and what’s expected of hero students. They already get more slack than they deserve.”

Hizashi grinned at him, shaking his head.

“If you say so. I just think we could be doing a better job of integrating them into the life of our hero students than a once a year embarrassment trial for them where almost none of them making past the first obstacle course.”

“Point taken,” Shota hummed. “Their basic P.E course is dismal compared to the Hero Courses. We could push to have a required Self-Defense class for all students regardless of their specialty.”

“Nezu would have to hire another teacher specifically for that,” Hizashi sighed. “We’re already stretched to our limits with the classes we do have and now... living on Campus.”

“He already was planning on hiring more teachers because the students live on Campus and need more adults living here to even things out for emergencies. We can try to convince him to hire specifically for this.”

“You’ll have to fight Power Loader. He’s been trying to have Nezu invest in more tech experts. Says Sasami is a sub-par example of a teacher and is little more than a babysitter for the more intelligent students that come through.”

Shota muttered darkly under his breath at the point. Nezu had been poaching potential replacements from I-Island for six months now without any kind of luck. Few wanted to leave an endless supply of advanced tech and open quirk laws for Japan’s strict adherence to quirk regulation and control of weapons.

The bad publicity was also a negative point in their favor. Few good teachers wanted to take up UA teaching positions at the moment because of all the bad publicity and threats done against them. They had the funding but not the opportunity for hire.

Those who did want to work for UA had been systematically shot down by Nezu for one reason or another. Lack of ranking. Lack of teaching credentials. Lack of mental fortitude. Lack of experience.

Though he had heard Nezu had been trying to get the Hero Public Safety Commission to back off of Gang Orca’s restrictions. The shady motherfuckers had been barring the poor guy from teaching certification for years because they wanted the man out on the field as much as possible. It looked good to have such an intimidating figure hunting Villains and would be ‘a waste of good publicity’ to allow the man to teach kids instead.

Controlling manipulative assholes.

They were behind pushing the kids across the nation to get their hero licensing early and Shota himself had only agreed it was a good idea because HIS god damn kids kept getting stuck in dangerous situations without the power to respond accordingly.

“Our psychology courses are run and designed for the Third Years by Hound Dog and are reserved for our Hero students,” Hizashi muttered. “It’s unreasonable to try to get him to do lessons for the whole school for every grade but... think we’d have any luck convincing him to write lessons plans for us teachers so that we can do it ourselves?”

“Worth a shot.” His tea had gone cold. Shota shoved into the microwave to warm up and leaned against the teacher lounge’s countertop. “We could maybe host group therapy sessions as well with some coaching if we’re careful about it.”

Hizashi wilted in his chair.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH,” the man yelled, startling a few birds on the windowsill. “I know it’s for the greater good, but this is gonna suck, yo. I already have a full schedule.”

The microwave beeped.

Hizashi’s head leaned backwards so that he was looking at Shota across the room.

“Speaking of full schedules, aren’t you meeting up with Shinsou soonish?”

Shota grunted.

“He’ll be here in a few minutes. We’ll stop by the Dorms on our way to the fields to check up on Bakugou first.”

“Was the harassment that bad?” Hizashi straightened to attention. “Wouldn’t think the little listener would...”

“Kid showed up to class sick,” Shota grumbled, blowing on the now too hot tea. “He didn’t even finish his test.”

“Shit, really?”

“He’s been overworking himself lately. Isolating himself. I had to make mandatory social time for him at the dorms. I’ve spoken to him

about seeing Hound Dog or another therapist of some kind but he refuses to reach out for help.”

“Fell asleep at one of the gyms a bit ago too, huh?” Hizashi stated rather than asked. “You want me to try to talk to him? Maybe take him out and about the town. Escaping campus might be best at this point. New faces. New environment. Might make him more open to talking and stuff.”

“It’s worth a try, but don’t push him.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!”

Shinsou opened the door, hesitating at the entrance. The kid already had the capture scarf at his hip. Still on the scrawny side beside his height, but much better than he’d been during the Sport’s Festival at the start of the year.

“Well, guess that’s my cue,” Shota deadpanned, pouring out the tea that was not meant to be consumed. Apparently. “Time to toss around a kid within the legal limits of our most sacred land.”

The kids hesitant smile twitched.

Shota pat the kid on the shoulder to let him know he was joking.

“But first we have to make sure my Trauma magnet is resting like he’s supposed to be.”

“Midoriya?” Shinsou asked as the door closed behind him.

“Nope, that’s my Problem child.”

“Do you have nicknames for all your students?”

“Just the ones that cause me trouble on a daily basis.”

“So most of them then.”

“Yes.”

Katsuki didn't envy Deku. It was clear Deku had thought his dreams had come true with pixie dust and found a dead unicorn instead being devoured by a fucking dragon. The Chosen One had found himself being hunted by a Dark Lord that had existed before either of their grandparents had their asses wiped for the first time.

Fuck.

Katsuki could practically see the bugged eyed look on Deku's face when he'd had all this shit laid out for him. The shitty nerd had been offered a magical solution to his genetic problem and then had been handed a fucked-up origin story that threw him into an ocean of shit he hadn't signed up for.

Of all the irresponsible dumb shit...

All For One's own chosen was out there and apparently had a destined clash that would keep bringing the fucker back into their fold. It was only a matter of time. The League of Bastards would be back in their lives and...

Wait.

Wait one fucking minute.

Did this make Katsuki the unwilling sidekick in this scenario?

Absol-fucking-lutely NOT!

"I'm gonna kill 'em," Katsuki muttered.

"What was that?" All Might asked him.

He coughed.

"How long did it take *your* body to adjust to the power?" Katsuki asked.

"Six years after it was passed to me."

Katsuki paused.

"You think Deku has that kind of time?"

"No."

Well fuck Deku then, huh.

Katsuki stretched. His shoulders popped and while it felt good it called to attention the exhaustion that sapped him so completely. An exhaustion that felt foreign to his normally adrenaline run body. He hadn't felt this kind of bone-deep, mind-numbing exhaustion since he was a child and had yet to discover the medical repercussions of his quirk. The wired exhaustion that had haunted his elementary school days when he and his parents had yet to become aware of how the chemicals in his body affected his health.

They'd passed by five or so benches so far and each one had looked more bedworthy than the last. And yet his foot tapped as they walked. His muscles felt tight and bunched up in the way that only a good long run could undo. The unused adrenaline was fucking with the fog that sat so readily in his head and it made him itch to shoot off a couple thousand explosions.

He didn't acknowledge that feeling though.

He refused to acknowledge it.

Because that would mean acknowledging the fact that he'd been neglecting his health despite all of his effort. Which, obviously, could not be fixed at this moment in time. He turned slightly towards All Might, the man waiting with the patience of a Saint for Katsuki to react and...

Honestly?

Everything that had happened this past year made a hell of a lot more sense and knowing what was going on was worth more than making the fog in his head go away. The caramel smell had grown more intense too, despite him sparking off throughout their walk.

"Guess I don't have a choice then," Katsuki said, looking up at the sky in thought.

All Might looked at him questioningly.

"I'll keep an eye on Deku. Since you can't do it anymore. Make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

'Even if I'm stripped of being a hero.'

All Might snorted, the laugh turning into a coughing fit of blood.

“You always surprise me, young Bakugou. You never do what I expect you to do,” All Might said, wiping his mouth.

“Sounds like a you problem,” Katsuki said. The fresh air really had done him a lot of good. It had been a long time since he’d been out here for anything but running. There was a steady breeze that tugged at them- which, granted, had threatened to tip his hazy ass over more than once since they’d stepped outside.

“Indeed,” All Might answered, sounding far away. Katsuki blinked hard. The ground in front of him coming more into focus. “It doesn’t have to be a one-way streak though. If you opened up to him, I’m sure young Midoriya would be able to help you too.”

“I’m sure Deku’s nosy as...” Katsuki paused. Took a breath. “I’m sure Deku already knows more about me and what’s going on than I’m comfortable with him knowing.”

“Don’t you think that might be the central issue?” All Might pushed. “The two of you make assumptions about one another but never actually speak. I think if you two...”

“I’ve left Deku alone,” Katsuki cut in, he turned to All Might, looking the man in the eye. “I kept my promise to you and I’ve avoided any kind of chance of confrontation with him. I’ve worked with him for any assignments we’ve had. I’ve promised to keep your secret. I even promise to watch out for him. Isn’t that enough?”

He was so fucking tired.

All Might pressed his lips together.

“Is that why you haven’t been interacting with him at all?” The man asked. “Because of the conversation we had before the camping trip?” The man looked wilted. As if Katsuki had delivered devastating news to him.

“What is with you people?” Katsuki asked. “Why is it so important to you that Deku and I be friends? It doesn’t make any sense to me. I don’t even... we’ve known each other our whole lives and when it comes down to it, we’ll always...” he gestured outwards as if to encompass all the complicated emotions involved. “We don’t have to kiss and make up to protect each other. Deku doesn’t need to know anything to do something dumb like mount a rescue mission to come after me. And I won’t hesitate to stop him from pulling some martyr stupidity.”

“Your right,” All Might backed off. “I just...” The man paused, looking off into the distance. “I just can’t help but think about how much easier things would have been if I’d learned to stand with people instead of above them.”

“There’s plenty of people willing to stand beside Deku,” Katsuki shot back. “He’s not alone and he relies on them *all* the time.”

“Does he though?” All Might said knowingly. Katsuki grimaced. “And what about you, young Bakugou? Do you?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets, the breeze making his feet slide back as he widened his stance to brace himself.

“I’m not like Deku.”

All Might hummed. The sun had been growing higher as they talked. It had been a while and Katsuki could no longer guess the time. His head too hazy for any kind of leg work. Classes were probably out for the day though.

Kirishima was probably knocking on his door, becoming more and more concerned with each ignored knock. His phone had been left too. Probably dead from all the text messages the squad would have sent by now.

“You know,” All Might said thoughtfully, “if I’d been willing to work with a team then maybe I would have had backup the day I fought All For One. I thought he was dead, but I’d been too injured myself to find the body and verify that. A team would have checked. A group would have finished the job. Then you young heroes wouldn’t have had to deal with All For One. Tomura Shigaraki wouldn’t have turned out the way he has.”

“I already said I wouldn’t leave him to deal with this shit alone,” Katsuki huffed.

All Might looked as if he wanted to press the issue more, but instead he pressed his lips together in a tight line and nodded.

“Naom...” All Might paused. “Tsukauchi told me that some of the things sent to you were quite graphic.” The man paused again, peeking at Katsuki in an inviting way... ‘here’s the part where you spill your secrets and emotions’ but with a touch of ‘please don’t break down or have a panic attack again.’

Katsuki shrugged.

He'd been avoiding thinking about it with the dedication of a professional A class lawyer finding loopholes for his A hole criminal client. Having the topic thrust upon him again forced everything into the open.

"Tell him I'm ready for whatever he's gotta do or say whenever he wants to say or do it," Katsuki said tiredly.

"You don't need to sound as if you're being marched off the plank," All Might said with the softest laugh in his voice. "Mainly he wants to ask you if you'd like to press charges against the people that have been harassing you. Speak to you about what your legal options are. He wants you to come forward about it..."

All Might couldn't possibly be that naïve.

He squinted up at the man, the exhaustion from this shit show of a day catching up to him. The question of does All Might blame him for Kamino intermingling with the raw genuine nature the man gave off. It was confusing as all fuck and it left Katsuki constantly feeling as if he'd missed a step in the program.

"Why?"

"Why what?" The man stared at him, eyes wide in that earnest way that always made Katsuki feel as if he was missing some kind of manipulation. People simply didn't *talk* to Katsuki the way All Might did. All Might had *no reason* to talk to him like this.

'*Do you hate me?*' the question sits at the base of his tongue like it has for the thousandth time since they'd begun this conversation. The millionth time since Kamino.

The man who had pulled him from the Sludge Villain.

The man who had taken a hit for him at the USJ.

The man who had forced a medal in his mouth instead of breaking the chains.

The man who called for an intervention and spoke to Katsuki about getting along better with Deku.

The man who gave up everything for Katsuki on that battlefield.

The man who was as subtle as a rock as he ‘snuck’ around teaching his favorite chosen one.

Did All Might hate Katsuki? He sounded so earnest. So genuine. And yet every instinct in Katsuki was telling him it could not be true. That his words about Katsuki being able to be one of the best was a ploy. A manipulation for Katsuki to be complacent and stay out of the way.

Katsuki desperately wants to know if All Might- if his hero hates him.

“Why would I press charges?” Katsuki asks instead. Because that’s a fuck ton easier to focus on than the complicated mess of being *honest* about the emotional shithole that’s eating him alive. “It’s not illegal to send someone a text message and its not like...”

‘It’s not like the League of Bastards don’t already have a million charges of murder, terrorism, and theft under their belt. Kidnapping and stalking are the minor things on the long list of bullshit they’ve pulled off in the last year.’

All Might looks grim at his question. Katsuki’s not sure why. It’s not exactly illegal for people to be assholes to you. He opens his mouth to speak when the most obnoxious ringtone Katsuki’s ever heard sounds between them.

“I AM HERE! PICK UP YOUR PHONE! I AM HERE! PICK UP YOUR PHONE! I AM HERE!”

All Might frowned down at his phone, gesturing for Katsuki to wait as he answered it.

Katsuki raised an eyebrow at the man.

“Excuse me, it’s Nezu,” All Might said before whispering. “This might take a while. Nezu can be long winded.” The retired hero tilted his head towards the dorms and Katsuki got the hint. Shoving his hands into his pockets and making his way back to the living space of class 1A.

The muscles that had ached before barely moved for him now. Stiff and heavy like lead. The unasked question sat in his mind like an infection and Katsuki had to take a deep breath and pressed his thumb deep into the tissue of his wrist to keep the thoughts at bay.

The Q that sits there is smudged again. Barely recognizable as a letter at all.

Now that the adrenaline of speaking to All Might has long since faded, Katsuki feels as if he's floating rather than walking. They traveled quite a bit from the dorms and while he'd be damned before he ever let the sound escape him, he internally groans at the distance.

He *refused* to sit on the benches though.

Partly out of principle.

Partly because he wouldn't be getting up again if he sat.

As much as he knew All Might expected to continue their conversation when he got back to the dorms, Katsuki wasn't sure if he'd be capable of holding one. Already his eyes were drooping heavily and there was a distinct tilt to his walk. It was going to be one of those days where he leaned against the elevators floor button rather than pressed it.

Katsuki stopped dead in his tracks.

His mom stood on the path, looking as if she'd been on her way to the dorms. Her fists were clenched at her sides as she marched. Shoulder's tense. Eyes looking forward. These things were fairly normal when it came his mother. Especially when she was looking for him.

The disheveled hair and running make up, on the other hand, had Katsuki taking a step back.

As if the hounds of hell were whispering in her ear, Mitsuki whipped around to face him, like the she banshee she was, locking eyes with him instantly.

'How the fuck...?!'

"Katsuki!"

The ring shocked him as he stumbled back.

He hadn't heard anything about his mom coming to the school. Why hadn't his dad warned him of this?!

"You skipped classes?!" Mitsuki snapped.

Katsuki blinked dumbly at her.

Mitsuki snapped her fingers in front of his face, manicured nails sharpened to a point as her eyes narrowed at him.

“I assumed you were my child, taking your education seriously, only to find out you’ve been lazing about at your dorms all day!” Mitsuki glared at him, looking him up and down in appraisal.

As usual, she seemed to find him lacking.

Her hand was already cocked on her hip, chin raised as she looked down her nose at him.

“They *said* you were sick.”

This was the part where he was supposed to answer.

Katsuki pressed down hard on his wrist.

“It wasn’t my call,” Katsuki defended himself. “I tried to go to class.”

“So the alternative was what?” Mitsuki asked, looking around her son at the path he’d come from. “To fuck off the rest of your day.”

“Where did you even come from?” Katsuki asked. “Why are you here?”

She bristled.

Fuck. Could he sit for this?

All the signs were saying this was going to take a while.

She was on him in a second.

“I’ve spent all day protecting you and this is the thanks I get?” She hissed, leaning into his face. Katsuki refused to step back as she got into his personal bubble. Doing so would only make it worse.

“Protecting me?”

“Your *father* gave the police your phone records,” Mitsuki hissed. “The fool. Some detective wrapped your father up in his clutches and convinced him it was for your own good.”

She snorted in disgust.

Dad.

The Old man had...

"I told Masaru not to talk about the phone call you made the night you arrived at the Camp." Mitsuki ran a hand through her hair, stressed, as those red eyes zeroed in on him. "The Media already has you pegged as a god damn Villain. We didn't need them knowing how badly you fucked up."

Katsuki felt cold to his very core.

"Well, hello there, already missing your old man?" Masaru says questioningly. He knows Katsuki's not the type. He knows something's wrong. "Huh? Yeah. Give me just one minute." He hears him tell someone else. "Sorry, about to get on the plane," his dad sounds genuinely apologetic.

"You're... going out of town?" Katsuki croaks.

"Yes. Katsuki, what's wrong? This isn't like you. Do you need me to come get you? I can. I absolutely can."

"No!" Katsuki says hurriedly. "No! That's good. When are you getting back?"

"Hm... a few days after you, I think. We left a note and some cash on the kitchen counter for you when you get back. Kat, what's wrong?"

"It's..."

He's about to say nothing, but he knows that's not right.

At this point it could put them in danger.

He can no longer keep quiet.

"It's... there's something I need to talk to you about, when you get back. It's important."

"Yes, yes, just... one more moment, I'm sorry, but I this can't wait. I understand..."

"Dad," Katsuki croaked. "It can wait. Get on the plane, okay?"

There's a pause.

"I can miss this flight, Katsuki, I... you're more important to me than a business trip. Do you need me to come get you?"

“No. No, it’s not about what’s happening at camp. I just... when you get back, I need to tell you something, okay?”

“Alright,” his dad says uncertainly. “Alright. If you change your mind, you tell me, and I’ll hop on a flight back. I love you.”

“Love you.”

His mom’s eyes are narrowed on him as he wavers in place.

“I was there when you made that phone call to your father, Katsuki,” she says quietly. “I saw the texts sent to you during the camping trip.”

I’m your friend, Katsuki.

You can call me Big Sis Magne.

Enjoy your training trip!

Katsuki feels sick. He presses a hand to his stomach as he tries to keep his breathing under control. She knows. She’s always known.

“If you hadn’t been so damn weak then you never would have been caught and caused all that trouble!”

Mitsuki grabs his arm in a vice like grip and Katsuki can’t deny that it’s the only thing that keeps him standing.

“You *knew* it was going to happen,” Mitsuki hissed. “Do you know what they can do to you because of that? Do you understand the legal repercussions?”

The conversation he’d just had with All Might rattles inside of him as if he’s a glass jar. The words like screws and jagged metal pieces scraping against the inside, leaving gouges and scratches on the inside lining.

"I..." His breathing felt as if it was through a tube. "I didn't think they'd... not at the camp..."

She scuffed.

"You think they'll believe someone like *you*, Katsuki?" Her grip tightened on his arm. "You're lucky that they haven't seemed to have connected the dots yet and I'm working on protecting you from any further investigation. Your little fucking dramatic panic attack on the phone wasn't recorded though so we're lucky there, at least, but it does look suspicious as fuck that you called us minutes after the League of Villains contacted you. It makes it look as if *we* knew what was going to happen too."

"I didn't..." Katsuki hacked as his lungs refused to cooperate with him. "I didn't know. I thought they'd try something when I was by myself! I was... I was going to tell Aizawa about the stalking on our way back."

Her eyes were cold as she shook him.

"Are you really *still* trying to make excuses?! Even now?" There was a cold fury in her voice and Katsuki shook his head.

"No. I know..." His voice cracked. "I know it was my fault! I'm not... the detective is coming to talk to me about... about the text messages."

His mom let his arm go and Katsuki found his legs giving out from under him. She had her fingers pressed to her forehead as if to ward off an incoming headache.

"Fuck, Katsuki, did you agree to talk to him?!" She hissed out. "It's bad enough you got yourself kidnapped and ended All Might's career, now you'll be known as the person who caused a terrorist attack too." She pierced him with a glare. "Do you know what your father and I are known for?"

"What?" Katsuki asked, the left field question throwing him off.

"Not fashion designers, that's for fucking sure. I'm not known as being an international model anymore Katsuki, no, the only thing anyone seems to want to talk about is how I'm the mother of a monster."

He stared blankly at her.

“What?”

“I’ve told you! How many times do I have to tell you that your actions have consequences? There is no one that sees you as a hero and you keep making yourself look more and more like a Villain as the days go by. I...” Mitsuki’s voice wavered, she crouched on the ground and grabbed him by the shoulders. “I promise that I will try to fix this, but you have to help yourself too.”

“I’m trying.”

“Not hard enough! Clearly! Skipping classes... failing your licensing exam!”

Katsuki felt whatever color remain drain from his face.

He hadn’t told his dad that information.

None of his mail was going to the house.

“How did you...?”

“Do you honestly think the school doesn’t update us?” Mitsuki scuffed. “Of course, we know you *failed*. No doubt it was because you thought you could just grace by like everything else you’ve done in your life.”

They’d removed Mitsuki from the school contacts. Only his dad’s number remained in the files. They’d made sure of it.

“Dad...”

“Oh, I know what you and your father have been up to.” Mitsuki cut him off. “He seems to think letting you off from dealing with the consequences of your actions is the way to go. Letting you change your phone number. Trying to hide your failures from me. Thinking you can hide away at UA and pretend that all your problems don’t exist! Cowering away from dealing with anything!”

She gestured at the UA Dorms in the distance.

“You’re supposed to be studying to be a hero. I told you to suck it up and deal with the leaked phone number yourself. I’ve *taught* you how to make positive, likable social media posts! I made you learn how to create accounts for that shit! You could have made a positive change with the skills I taught you. You could have gotten in contact with a Media expert on our dime to handle things.”

Her nails dug into his shoulders and she shook him again.

The motion caused his stomach to roll, a hot feeling spreading and with a sick realization he knew what was coming.

“Instead of doing anything, you decided to ignore your phone altogether. You *let* this happen. You allowed this media problem to get out of hand. You attracted *Villains* to you. You caused a terrorist attack!”

Katsuki choked, leaning forward he ripped himself from his mom’s grip to vomit on the cement.

“Really, Katsuki?”

Her face was thunderous as she stood, he could see her heels had some sick on them.

“Can we do this later?” He pleaded.

He knew asking was useless though. They’d had arguments like this a thousand times before. She *never* let him do things later. He knew that. No matter how tired he was or how late it was or what else he had going on, whatever it was had to be dealt with at that very moment.

“Because of you we can’t do this later,” Mitsuki dismissed.

“I don’t...” Katsuki spit out the bad taste in his mouth. “I fucked up.” His voice sounded off, even to his own ears. He was slurring his words. “What do you even want me to do? I’m not going to lie. It was my fault. I should have spoken up about it.”

She grabbed him by his arm and the world spun as she forced him to his feet. The urge to vomit again overtook him. He couldn’t feel where his feet were landing.

“For fucks sake Katsuki, stand!” The grip began to hurt. “You’ll come home for now and I will deal with the detective.”

Mitsuki tried to move, but Katsuki couldn’t see. The world was fuzzy and his head was full of cotton and his feet felt like rubber. He reached out to steady himself- to grip her shoulder or arm but his fingers moved like limp twigs and he barely felt the edge of her shirt before his knees were giving out on him again.

“Jesus Christ! You were JUST walking! I know you’re not sick. Stop being a dramatic bit- ”

A whoosh and harsh movement made him cringe, jerking in place.

“That is more than enough out of you.”

That deep baritone was not his mother.

There was a thin arm around his waist. A hand on his hip supporting him. One very bony shoulder his head lay against. Katsuki blinked slowly at bright yellow locks so unlike his mother’s own straw-colored hair hung in front of him.

“Unhand my son, All Might,” his mom sounded like an angry cat, her voice coming out in a deep hiss.

“I think that’s the last thing I’ll be doing,” All Might said calmly, a deep seeded anger in his voice that reminded Katsuki of Kamino. “I suggest you be on your way now. The authorities will be in contact with you, I’m sure.”

‘What?’

He tried to blink away the fog, force himself to be steady and clear of mind, but everything felt so far away. Like he was underwater. All Might was holding him carefully up, eyes looking down the path.

Where had his mom gone?

“My son is coming back with me. I don’t care if you used to be the number one hero, you have no legal right to keep my son from me. I chose to allow him to stay at the dorms after all of you fail to keep him safe and I choose to take him back home now because its what’s best for him.”

‘Oh,’ Katsuki thought numbly. *‘There she is.’*

“I may be retired,” All Might said in that same steady voice. “But I assure you, while I am here, you will not lay another finger on this child.”

His mom barked out a laugh.

Katsuki’s mind turned in all sorts of direction trying to figure out what that meant. A tiny part of his mind huffed in annoyance at being called a child. But it was a very, very tiny part. Most of him was too

busy being mildly alarmed and extremely confused with a touch of pure exhaustion dabbled in making that floaty feeling layering all of those emotions that much worse.

Katsuki pushed away from All Might, stumbling back and falling to his knees as he tried to figure out what the ever-living fuck was going on. And why the fuck All Might seemed to be going up against his mom.

“What’s...” he slurred. He turned, his eyes refusing to focus as he scanned the area for his mother. “Hag?”

“I’m here, brat,” his mom called back. “Seems there’s been a misunderstanding of sorts.”

The last thing Katsuki wanted to do was go with his mom.

Katsuki didn’t want to talk to the Detective either.

And it would be great if he could just not have life altering conversations with people while the world tilted in unpleasant ways.

That would be great.

“More of a clarification of things, I think,” All Might called and fuck. For being so thin, All Might’s shoes were fringing huge. What the fuck. His knees hurt an awful lot. He tottered over, sitting on his ass as he tried to get his head on straight.

The retired hero was standing in front of him like a shield.

“Get up, Katsuki,” his mom told him.

Commanded him.

That seemed like a fair thing to ask. All things considered. He could probably do it. In a minute. He just needed a minute. Luckily Katsuki has a lot of practice with this. He gets his knees under him first before pushing up with arms that he spends way too much time working on at the gym for them to be wobbling this fucking much.

He’s standing.

Both All Might and the Hag look a bit fuzzy, but he’s on his feet.

His mom looks triumphant. About what Katsuki can’t seem to connect the dots. Nothing about this situation is good.

"I'm taking *my* son home. I'll be in contact with the school shortly," Mitsuki promised.

If the school found out about his knowledge of the attack beforehand and decided to kick him out, he wanted to face it head on. Not cower away. His mom reached for him. He shook his head as he stepped back. The look of triumph on her face morphing to resignation.

"This isn't the time or place to argue with me, Katsuki," she warned, those red eyes glinting at him.

All Might took a more firm step in front of him.

"You seemed more than okay with having an altercation with him when it was just the two of you," All Might observed. "When all the power was in your court and you could say one horrid thing after another."

Mitsuki snorted.

There was a tension to her jaw though. A hand on her hip, It was the way she carried when she was about to do the Studio guards duty of kicking someone out of the agency because they hesitated too long. It was the look just before Katsuki would find himself pinned to a wall or be dragged to his room or earn a decent hit.

She leveled both of them with her dagger like stare before her eyes fell more fiercely on All Might.

"I read over the documents dictating what UA can and can't do," Mitsuki said, raising both her delicately plucked eyebrows. "Legally speaking, a teacher of UA has the ability to stand in for medical decisions, safety decisions, disciplinary decisions, and living decisions as a stand in for a parent. However, in the case that the parent is able to be contacted or is present, then all decisions go to the biological parent."

His mother leaned in closer.

"I. AM. HERE." She said it mockingly, playfully. "So get the fuck out of my way, All Might."

"Circumstance's change," his teacher told her, that anger that had laced his voice the night of Kamino still remained. "they changed the moment you became a suspect of child abuse."

His mother twitched.

Katsuki himself felt as if the floor had fallen away from him.

“What are you...” Katsuki started, baffled.

“Says the man,” Mitsuki hissed, “who saw fit to walk up to my chained child on a stadium in front of a *fucking nation* to replace a muzzle with a medal.”

All Might stepped back as if he'd been hit by a Nomu.

Katsuki paused.

He stared at the furious look on his mom's face.

It was the first time the Hag had said anything bad about anyone else involved with the Sport's Festival.

“Teachers,” Mitsuki snarled, her voice going into a roar. “Teachers who knocked my son out with gas that could have stopped his HEART! WHO CHAINED HIM UP AND USED THEIR QUIRKS AGAINST HIM AS IF HE WAS A CRIMINAL. HEROES WHO ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT MY SON BUT DIDN'T! THESE! THESE!”

She gestured wildly out in front of her, shaking with anger.

“YOU?! THESE PEOPLE!?”

She spat on the ground in front of All Might, looking like a demon from the pits of hell. Like she did in the middle of their arguments.

“You throw around the word of abuse, as if EVERYTHING I've done wasn't for my family and my son. As if my sometimes harsh words have ANYTHING on the shit you lot have pulled against him! I have done everything to raise my son to be a strong person and a powerful hero with good morals. My boy is strong! He is talented! He is hard working! He's insanely smart. He has an iron will and you know what?”

She stabbed her manicured hand into All Might's chest.

“That's because of ME! Not you. I snipped his bad behaviors at the root. Any time he's ever tried to pull shit, I've forcefully put him on the right path. I made sure he had the extra classes to make him well rounded. I made sure he didn't turn out to be a sniveling, oversensitive brat. I made sure his biology didn't get in the way of his

job opportunities! I've made sure he can handle social situations!"

She gestured at Katsuki now.

"HE'S an introvert! Did you know that?" She scuffed. "My boy gets overwhelmed by too many people. But you wouldn't know that because I TAUGHT HIM how to get the fuck over such a dumb problem. I TAUGHT HIM how to not freak out or panic when there's people around. He and I worked together for YEARS to make sure he wasn't weak."

All Might's eyes had grown impossibly wide. His body tense. The look in his eyes shifting back and forth between guilt and rage.

"I made sure he had the right type of therapy that would fit him!"

Katsuki froze.

"I've made sure he knows that anything LESS than what I KNOW he can do in school is unacceptable."

There was a hot cold feeling running rampant in his body.

"I made sure that no one will know what a fucking mess he is with people because there are people LIKE YOU who will see it as a negative. Because people WANT heroes to be happy-go-lucky fuckers and they hate anything that doesn't fit that description!"

She was in All Might's face now, standing on her tiptoes and using All Might's tie to leverage herself higher while making him come down to her level.

"My harsh words to my child are to prepare him for the outside world! To prepare him for the horrific shit the media has to say, for the things they HAVE said to my boy. I don't abuse my child. If anything the shit you people have pulled is what I would call *abuse*! ABUSE OF POWER! ABUSE OF INFLUENCE. NEGLECT TO CURB THE SOCIAL MEDIA ATTACKING MY CHILD ON A DAILY BASIS. NEGLECT TO PROTECT MY CHILD NOT JUST FROM VILLAINS BUT FROM ALLIES!"

She shoved All Might so hard that he made took several steps back.

His mom was breathing hard, her chest heaving in fury. Katsuki had been stunned speechless. Too shocked by his mother's defense of him—probably the first time in his life. Shocked by the revelations she'd

revealed in her anger.

Shocked enough that when her delicate looking hand wrapped around his upper arm, Katsuki didn't pull away. Just stared at the ground as he felt himself jerked forward. A large, emaciated hand kept Katsuki in place.

"My short failings don't make what you've done any less terrible," All Might said. His voice hallow as he kept his mother from moving. "I will take responsibility for what I've done to hurt your son. You are valid in how you view us. However, going forward, part of how I can fix what I've done, is ensuring that you can do no more damage either."

All Might's hand gently grabbed his mother's wrist. Retired or not, it was easy for him, even against his mom's shocking strength, to forcefully remove her, to disentangle her from Katsuki himself.

His mother fought back. Yanking and screaming. Furiously throwing insults and threats at the man.

"Katsuki!" She twisted in All Might's grip. "Why the fuck are you just standing there?"

Her voice sounded hurt.

Katsuki opened his mouth to speak, but words refused to come. He reached out a hand, but to do what, he had no fucking idea.

And then a familiar white wrap had his mother in a tight hug. All Might stepping away as if burned. He blinked slowly as he followed the wraps to the man controlling them.

Aizawa's red eyes glow ominously as he approached. The way they moved from his mom to All Might to Katsuki himself was enough to warrant an exorcist's entrance. A very *dramatic* exorcist's entrance.

"All Might," Aizawa said slowly as his teacher's eyes settled on the Hag. "Did you take my sick student outside when he's supposed to be resting?"

All Might sputtered.

"Well, that is... perhaps? Its just..." The glowing red eyes narrowed as they turned on the tall skeletal man. All Might folded. "Yes. I did. Allow me to escort young Bakugou back to the dorms now. At this

very moment. Away from this location.”

“Don’t you dare!” Mitsuki hissed. “I will sue all of you for this! Katsuki, don’t you dare walk away from me!”

Her voice sounded as if it were coming from underwater though.

Hands wrapped around his shoulder and guided him away, back towards the dorm. He’s vaguely aware of passing a student with purple hair. Vaguely aware of the feel of Aizawa’s eyes on the back of his neck.

He barely notices when they enter the dorms. His classmates call out to them. He sees Deku’s eyes widen. Kirishima blanches and try to follow. But he doesn’t remember anything else. They make it up to his room and Katsuki folds onto the bed in a boneless manner.

He doesn’t remember All Might standing.

Nor does he remember the quiet: “We’ll fix this, kid.”

His classmates and Aizawa disappear sometime in the night.

Katsuki wakes up feeling marginally better, but it's not to anything good.

The news outlets are alive with bulletin boards about the destruction of a Mafia district. A villain named Overhaul arrested. Sir Night Eye murdered. A dozen heroes and Mafia members sent to the hospital.

Including Kirishima and Aizawa.

The Bad Cycle

Chapter Summary

Chapter 21: The Bad Cycle

Katsuki wakes up to find that those closest to him are gone and works to fix the shitshow he's created for himself while Present Mic implements his and Eraserhead's plans to add mental health to the curriculum.

Chapter Notes

For those of you asking when the comfort/Recovery will start, I can officially say Chapter 28. As of now Chapters 21-27 are written and Part 2 is complete on my computer.

Part 3 will start at Chapter 28

I've added more tags to this story so please feel free to update yourselves on that if you need to watch out for yourself mentally. If you decide to withdraw from this story for any reason, I 100% understand. I will be adding more as Part 3, the last part of Social Media: 101, is written out.

The Social Media aspect of this that I've introduced so far is about to get a lot worse. Not necessarily in depths but in awareness by others, so they will be exploring all the harassment more and that means it will technically be more difficult to read as it will be seen and explored by multiple characters.

LASTLY: For those of you looking forward to Denki Kaminari's chapter, know that it exists but that I broke up the scenes into different chapters because it reads more naturally over time rather than my caffeine created chapter where it all unraveled in one go (-_-). (The fuck past me? What were you thinking? It read like a piece of shit on fire when I went back in to do edits and rewrites.)

(THIS is why you always let your chapters rest kids. If you write and post, you'll write yourself into a nasty corner).

Chapter 21: The Bad Cycle

Sero's the one who tells him.

He's waiting outside his door the next morning as Katsuki lurches out of bed at the sound of knocking. There's burnt toast on a tray with white rice and eggs. A glass of orange juice that's suffered from spillage on either side. A cloth that's already dirty.

Katsuki blinks at it tiredly, beckoning Sero inside.

He pops the billboard off. Letting it fall behind his desk as casually as he can. Sero quirks an eyebrow but doesn't comment. Doesn't try to look. Katsuki's glad he doesn't have to fight. If it had been Kaminari, there definitely would have been one. Ashido was fifty-fifty. Swinging from chaotic dumbass to wise sage in a matter of seconds.

But Sero just sets the food down. Sits on Katsuki's bed with those long arms and giant elbows leaning against his knees. Katsuki can see the box under his bed, just between Sero's legs and he itches to push it further into the depths. Which is dumb. It's not a thing people notice, so he ignores the feeling to stare at the unappealing food before him.

For his part, his friend looks around the room, eyes lingering on all the books before falling onto the glass doors covered in marker chalk with Katsuki's schedule and diet written out in extreme detail across both doors leading to his balcony. Sero squints at it, grimacing. The fuck?

"Kinda didn't expect it to be so plain," Sero admits.

Katsuki shrugs.

"It really doesn't suit you," Sero continued.

"What *would* suit me?" Katsuki asks, plopping down beside Sero with all the grace of a beached whale.

"Something more loud, I guess. Metalhead posters. Hero merchandise. Cookbooks. Weights. A secret plant collection taking up one entire wall." Sero shrugs. "Besides your desk with all the work piled on it... your room doesn't look lived in at all. Which is doubly weird since you spend so much time here avoiding us." There's a tinge of bitterness in Sero's voice at the last bit, but Katsuki avidly avoids it.

He shrugs instead, feeling an odd weight in his head still.

Fuck. Fatigue is making him *stupid*. He rolls onto his side and pushes himself on his elbows as he tries to wake up.

“Why’d you bring me food?”

He’s trying to remember why he feels like utter shit. Why it feels like he’s suffering from a low blood pressure crash when he’s been so fucking meticulous to avoid them.

“You’ve been out, out, my dude,” Sero answers. “Classes start in about twenty minutes.” Katsuki goes to stand, his mind blank as he silently freaks. He’s got his hands on a new set of clothes before Sero makes a noise like a dying cat. “BUT Recovery Girl says you’re not allowed to go to class today. Don’t worry too much about that. The others are gonna have to make up classwork too, so you can catch up with them.”

“Others?” Katsuki asked.

He goes to grab his phone off the stand but it’s not there.

He stares at it blankly.

Katsuki doesn’t lose his shit. He knows where everything is at all times. He’s not a hot mess like Deku or Kaminari.

It’s only then that he realizes he’s wearing his school uniform. His shoes have been taken off, but they’re not in the right place. His bag isn’t hung up either. It’s on its side beside his bed.

Someone that’s not him has been in his room. Someone that Katsuki didn’t let in. The very idea makes his stomach turn as he tries desperately to remember what the last thing he did was.

“Dude, what did I just say?” Sero asks in exasperation.

Katsuki blinks again, rubbing at the headache that’s attacking his skull.

“What do you mean others?” Katsuki asks again, grabbing on to the first odd thing in Sero’s sentence.

What the ever-living fuck happened?

“Well,” Sero bites his lip. “Everybody’s safe.”

Ah fuck.

“What did Deku do?” Katsuki snaps.

“I mean... Midoriya was involved but it wasn't his fault.”

Oh. Oh yes, the fuck it was. Someway. Somehow. Katsuki knows deep in his soul that whatever the fuck happened was like 74% Deku's fault. Heavy dose of wrong place wrong time syndrome and a dash of stupidity in the fuckers that are supposed to be watching him.

He'd just promised All Might he'd make sure Deku was safe. Not that he wouldn't otherwise but... oh. He'd talked to All Might yesterday. And...

“It was a mission,” Sero continued. “You know how Kirishima's been all hush hush about his internship?”

He has?

Katsuki buries that small tidbit of guilt away. Folding it on the inside like folding dough. He hasn't really been paying attention to anybody else in... in a while. He can't remember the last thing he said to Kirishima. The last thing they did together.

“What about it?” Katsuki asks anyways.

There's a crushing feeling as he listens to Sero talk. Kirishima's in a bad way in the hospital but they aren't allowed to go see him. Aizawa and Deku are in the hospital with minor injuries. They'll be back in what's expected to be a few days.

It doesn't help that as Sero talks about what happened to his best friend and their classmates and Sensei... that yesterday starts to come back as well. The talk with All Might. Some detective wanting to interrogate him about the text messages and Katsuki's own culpability. The secrets of One For All and All For One and Deku. His mom.

Had they... had they arrested his mom?

Katsuki looks at Sero.

He looks a little anxious as he talks, but he doesn't look like ‘I witnessed your world fall apart yesterday’ anxious. Just normal, ‘I hate to be the bearer of bad news’ anxious. He gets why they sent Sero for this.

Both Kaminari and Horns have a tendency to fall apart when they give bad news.

Sero is calm as he speaks.

Unhurried despite telling him that classes were very soon. That Sero should have been out the door nearly fifteen minutes ago. Like he's not about to be late for class because he's taking the time to talk to Katsuki about all this.

Sero's also not the type of beat around the bush though.

If Sero knew about what happened between his mom and the teachers yesterday then that would have been the first thing talked about.

"Kirishima's gonna be fine though," Sero said soothingly. He's doing that weird thing with his elbows though. Holding them up a little too high like he's gonna put his hands on his hips. His horse smile, a bit too big.

He's nervous.

"Of course, he is," Katsuki barks. "Are you doubting him, Soy Sauce?"

Sero relaxes.

"Never."

"Good."

The moment was ruined by the sound of his stomach growling. He frowned down at it, going to grab the plate, but Sero was faster. The lanky youth practically shoving it into his hands. Katsuki takes it, a bit annoyed. The hovering was reminding him unpleasantly of Deku. He sent his friend an annoyed look until Sero took a seat.

"You scared us... again. It's becoming a reoccurring problem with you."

Katsuki's not sure what Sero's talking about.

The last thing he remembers is Aizawa wrapping his mom up in his capture scarf. Though he guesses that he had to get here somehow and he's pretty sure he walked himself cause otherwise, he'd have woken up in the clinic rather than here.

"What I do?" Katsuki asks, shoveling another bite into his mouth.

It's awful. Everything has long since gone cold. The rice is overcooked. The eggs are soggy. The toast tastes like stale bread was used. Either Sero hadn't been paying attention at all or Kaminari had cooked this.

Sero lets out a frustrated breath.

"We came back, and you were gone," Sero stares off at Katsuki's bookshelves. His Sherlock Holmes leatherbound leaning precariously against his Zombie books, squishing one of the covers in a way that he knows he'll be fixing the moment Sero leaves.

"You should have seen Aizawa. We only knew you were missing because he went up to check on you and he came down all..." Sero makes a motion towards his hair and neck. "Someone called him on his cell and, I mean, I don't know what was said but he went from annoyed to 'USJ level' real quick. We thought..."

What kind of phone call...

Katsuki stretched out his legs, trying to get the nerves firing off like pissed off pigeons to leave him be.

"Then All Might brought you back."

Katsuki frowned.

"I walked back myself," Katsuki corrected. "And we were just talking."

Sero scratched at his cheek as he looked anywhere but at Katsuki.

"Technically you walked, yeah, I mean, Sensei really laid into All Might about being more responsible."

"About what?" He fought to keep the bewilderment out of his voice but from the exasperation on Sero's face, he hadn't managed.

"Bakugou..." Sero leaned forward, his hands stapling in front of him as he looked Katsuki straight in the eye. "What do you remember about getting back?"

Katsuki remains silent. Unsure.

Sero nods.

"That's what I thought. You were upright but you weren't conscious, man, you were... it was like at the end of the test yesterday. Momo wasn't the first person to talk to you, you know? Midoriya tried to get

your attention before that too. Jiro was poking you when you stopped writing in the middle of the exam.”

‘What?’

“Momo’s right too, you know.” One large elbow nudged him hard. “If you don’t feel well, it doesn’t matter if you have a fever or not. It’s okay to rest.”

“Laying down in bed isn’t going to make me feel better,” Katsuki tells him without thinking.

“That’s kind of how this works dude,” Sero tells him with an amused smile. “R and R, as they say, rest and relaxation. Not straining yourself. Taking a breather. Beauty sleep and all that good stuff.”

“No, that’s not...” *what I mean.*

Katsuki presses his fingers to his forehead.

His health will only deteriorate further if he stays in bed. He’s fallen into the bad cycle. The headache from oversleeping banging around in his skull as limbs feel like led. He knows this feeling and he curses himself for allowing his own mental weakness get him to this point.

Katsuki’s routine keeps him healthy.

It’s rigid and tough and sometimes he does just want to flop out onto the couch and mindlessly watch a movie or three. Sometimes he wants to try new street foods while walking about the city. Sometimes he wants to fuck off for a few days.

But that causes his body to crash.

He should have known better about the head cold. The warning signs were all there that he was crashing, but it had been so *long*. He’d built his entire life around the weaknesses of his own quirk that he’d *forgotten* what it meant to fall out of that cycle.

To let himself get trapped in his own head.

It’s a scary reminder that if Katsuki lets himself have a depressive funk it could literally kill him. He doesn’t say any of this to Sero though. He’s never talked about the quirk drawbacks to anyone outside of his dad.

“Don’t let this be an excuse, Katsuki,” his mom had told him when his

father had sat her down and talked about it. “It just means you have to work a little harder.”

So he doesn’t tell Sero that the food he brought isn’t balanced enough or full enough.

That the moment he leaves, Katsuki is going to have to go downstairs and make his own meal anyways. That he’ll have to drink a lot more water than what was brought up. Carbs and fish this early in the morning are best for his *needs*. That the food he just ate for his friend will probably fuck him up a bit.

“Since Aizawa and Kirishima are out of commission Present Mic is gonna be checking in on you this afternoon,” Sero tells him. “All Might, Midoriya, Uraraka and Tsu are also gone for the next few days. They’re with Sir Nighteye right now.”

Katsuki swallows and nods.

Adrenaline pumps through his body, pushing against the effects of the extreme amounts of nitroglycerin as he listens to Sero’s instructions. The muscles in his legs ache and his hands shake under the covers. His shoulders feel tight all the way down into his spine. As if no matter how much he stretched, he will never get rid of that feeling.

“Me, Ashido and Kami will come see you later, okay?” Sero stretches and then pulls out Katsuki’s phone from his pocket, waving it back and forth. “Don’t move about too much and call us if you need anything.”

Katsuki nods.

He doesn’t tell Sero that in order to not feel lightheaded and sick that he’s going to have to go on a treadmill for a few hours. That he’s going to have to straddle the line between his normal physiology that requires rest and his quirk biology that requires him to get rid of the excessive adrenaline chemical that’s keeping him alive in order to forcefully balance his body’s hormones.

He knows what it looks like on the outside.

Katsuki looks like he has a problem. Like someone suffering from anorexia that keeps insisting that they’ve had too much to eat. Unless he goes into explicit, terrifying detail about the why and reveals all the deficits to his quirk- something that will have to be dragged out of him, then there’s no way to put it in terms that won’t look really bad.

He knows what happens when people find out.

Until he was about ten, his dad and him would sit down with his homeroom teacher and ‘talk’ about it. The longer his dad would sit and explain Katsuki’s need to regulate his own chemicals because his quirk is a Mutation and Emitter not just an emitter, the more the teacher’s face would cloud over.

Because the bright A+ student they thought they were getting came with a long list of things to watch out for and keep after. His father always bent over backwards to assure them that Katsuki was self-sufficient. That Katsuki knew the warning signs of a blood pressure crash. That Katsuki kept up with his own diet and that Katsuki would remove himself from the classroom if it was needed and *only* if it was needed. That Katsuki had been put through the special certification to use his quirk to spark off for his health. That Katsuki would be doing intense running before class, during lunch, and after school in order to maintain a level head throughout.

Really, the teacher wouldn’t have to do anything.

It was just caution to explain all of this to them. To let them know to ‘look out’ for certain things. Katsuki didn’t need help. Katsuki would not hinder the flow of class in any way. Katsuki would not be a burden.

The teachers rarely believed his dad though.

Every year for the first few weeks they would watch Katsuki warily. Waiting for Katsuki to fuck up; to pass out from low blood pressure, to lash out from overflow of adrenaline, to distract the class with the build up of stress from too many chemicals running through his body. To prove that he was too much of a burden to deal with. That the cons of his biology outweighed the pros of his academics.

Katsuki always proved them wrong, of course, and by the end of the first nine weeks they’re suspicious looks would turn to approval.

Katsuki’s few slip ups were swept under the rug like they didn’t happen.

By time Middle school arrived both he and his dad decided that Katsuki had it under control enough that those meetings weren’t necessary. Katsuki had built his life outside of school around managing the effects of his quirk.

He made his own meals. Set up his own workout routine. No one needed to know what Katsuki put in to looking like he had all his shit together and a quirk that appeared as straightforward and powerful as people assumed it to be.

A tiny voice in the back of his head reminds him that he needs a spotter after a crash like this. Sero would do it. If he knew. If Katsuki explained his mutation to Sero, he would skip class to help Katsuki regulate safely. If he tells Sero that he's doomed to crash over and over again if he doesn't regulate... Sero will help him.

"Do you need anything else before I head out?" Sero asks, smiling lopsidedly.

"Get to class before you flunk out," Katsuki muttered.

Sero smirks at him, giving him a mocking salute goodbye.

As soon as the door clicks shut, Katsuki lets his head fall between his knees as he steadies his breathing.

It hadn't actually been that long ago since his last crash... now that he thinks about it. He crashed only a few weeks ago when he had his mental meltdown after the remedial training and before that... He crashed at the police station. Three days strapped to a chair unable to move or regulate had sucked ass. Katsuki doesn't really count that one 'cause there was zero fucking things he could have done about that shitshow. Still...

He's had a blood pressure crash three times in just as many months.

That's... that's really fucking bad. Even as a kid, his crashes had been months apart. Before he'd learned to watch them and control his diet and exercise routine. He's never had this *many* in such quick succession. Which meant Katsuki was losing control. He'd become lazy and overconfident in himself.

Post-crash is dangerous to re-regulate, but he's only ever done it by himself anyways. Rare as it is. He's not *supposed* to, but he won't mess up Sero's classwork for this. And he won't have Sero looking at Katsuki like everyone else who knows. Like Deku looks at him even though the shitty nerd doesn't know. Can't know. Not with how much effort he's put into hiding this aspect of himself.

Like his dad does when he goes out for his fourth run of the day when he's already ragged because his nitro suddenly increased and his body

pushed out more adrenaline to compensate. When his dad gets complaints from the neighbors because he's had to spend hours letting off explosions in order to sleep that night.

All the judgement of his character and worry about him overworking is worth not ever seeing anyone look at Katsuki like his dad does in those moments. Like the Hag looks at him. As if he's a defective product with an expired warranty so they can no longer replace it.

It reminds him of another looming issue.

What happened to his mom?

An electric shock goes through him at the thought. It feels more intense than usual and Katsuki actually full body flinches. He forgot.

He hacks out a laugh that sounds more like a cough.

Even thinking about his mom stresses him out, apparently.

The next jolt is more manageable. But only barely. He doesn't even know where to begin in asking about her. The only two people Katsuki knows actually know what happened are gone right now. He can't ask about his mom, or the interrogation that will happen, or where he stands right now in concerns to the school.

Asking random teachers about it certainly wouldn't be productive.

He hunches his shoulder at the next shock.

He breathes in and out, trying to calm his racing heart.

There's nothing he can do for now. Nothing at all.

Hanta fell into his seat with a moan after Present Mic ushered him in with little more than a long look. To his right, in front of Kirishima's empty seat, Kaminari kept glancing back at him, looking anxious. Mina kept her eyes straight ahead, a glazed-over expression on her face as she quietly worked.

The empty seats of Uraraka, Tsu and Deku only seemed to add to the tension in the classroom. Bakugou's added disappearance not helping

matters at all.

“We’re not supposed to be facing stuff like this yet,” Kaminari had whispered at him when the news broke. “Why does this stuff keep happening to us?”

“We’re heroes,” Mina pointed out. “It’s bound to happen.”

“Don’t make me feel dumb,” Kaminari hissed. “You *know* what I mean. You know this isn’t normal.”

“You’re right,” Mina said, “sorry. I’m just... trying not to think about it?”

Kaminari had grimaced and nodded.

The rest of the class had, more or less, about the same reactions. All waiting around for news about their classmates. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Adults rushing around them, whispering to one another. Glancing at them.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Sero clenched his fists under the desk.

No matter how much the adults wanted to deny it, they were involved. There was no suggesting that it was Midoriya’s business or Tsu’s business or Kirishima’s business and leaving it at that.

Wasn’t it obvious by now?

Maybe it was because of the trauma. Maybe it was the shared experiences. Maybe it was the fact that when backed into a corner they’d had to rely on one another to survive and that... that changed their relationship.

To say they were just classmates was... was wrong.

Though what word would fit into the twisted, soaked puzzle with burn marks all around it who could say. Friends...

Yeah, they were friends, but it went deeper than that. It wasn’t family. It’s not like he could say that he was best friends with every member of his class either. Hell, there were a lot of classmates he was still learning the basics about even after all these months but...

But they were more.

They were... integral. Not a community. Not a group. Not...

There were a thousand words that didn't describe them and no words that quite fit.

"Sero."

His head shot up to look Present Mic in the eyes. The man was bearing his teeth at him, mouth looking caught between a grimace and an attempt to be stern and managing neither successfully.

"Summarize Abys for me."

Present Mic folded his arms over his chest even as Hanta sat up straighter and picked up the book that had been laid in front of him not even ten minutes ago. He flipped it to the back, looking guiltily as the words and scanning them.

"It's... uh... it's a book about a kid whose quirk opened up a miniature black hole in India and ate up a portion of the continent." Hanta said quietly as he looked up at Present Mic. "He uh... the hero in the novel was able to close the black hole using his quirk, but he wasn't able to reverse the damage and the book is sort of... the consequences of that for the kid."

"Very good, glad that if you can't pay attention in class, you're at least reading the back of the book."

Kaminari raised his hand.

Hanta sent him a nod of gratitude as Present Mic turned away from him, the blonde shooting him a 'I'm here for you, man, I got this' look.

"Sensei, why are you having us read something so depressing? There's a lot of other really great books out there."

Present Mic's face turned hard as he headed up to the front of the class.

"Normally I give you a couple of weeks to read a new book, but I want you all to really dive into this one and read it quickly," Present Mic declared, looking them all in the eye. "As you are aware... several of your classmates aren't here because they went on a mission." He held up his hand to stall questions as Iida's hand shot up immediately. "A little girl was rescued with a... a dangerous quirk. She has nowhere to go and Aizawa is considering having her live here on campus,

primarily in 1A's dorm alongside Aizawa's living quarters.”

There was a tense silence among their class as Present Mic paused.

It made sense. The campus and especially the new dorms had been built for the sole purpose of withstanding Villain attacks and kidnapping...

Hanta's eyes found Bakugou's empty seat.

Kidnapping kids with powerful quirks.

He forced his eyes forward again as Present Mic cleared his throat.

“I'm not saying that this book will be a guide to how to deal with this type of situation, but it was the closest I could find and I've always found that stories breed empathy and clarity on a matter.” Present Mic kept his gaze level on them. “Usually, we reserve these types of discussions for third years but well... there's a lot your class has been forced to learn early and too fast so...”

Present Mic picked up the book.

It had a black cover. Silver lettering and lining with a 3D effect to make it look as if the cover was breaking apart. A cool design... he'd thought. Now it looked more ominous.

“Soooooo,” Kaminari drawled. “This all happened yesterday, are you saying you created this entire project in like... 12 hours?”

His teacher met their eyes blankly.

“Five, actually, at about two this morning.”

Hanta winced.

“In saying that...” Mic continued. “I don't expect less effort from you just because this is a spur of the moment assignment. I have additional reading material in these packets that's more psychological based and no, I don't expect you guys to develop a degree in psychology overnight... its just tips and tricks on how to handle trauma-based responses better and to recognize them in yourself and others, we don't expect you to do so readily or to even do it right, but we want effort put in. This is something you'll need in the long term, not just with Eri.”

YaoMomo's hand went up, but for once she didn't wait to be called

on.

“Eri is the name of the child?”

Present Mic nodded, rubbing at his face.

“You’re all good kids,” Present Mic said slowly. “I trust you to do the best with the tools you currently have. This project is meant to give you sharper tools and provide you with the skills to learn.”

Hanta could see the dark circles under Present Mics eyes now. Paying attention as he was, it wasn’t hard to see the slouch of the man’s shoulders and the tired way he held himself. He swallowed, meeting Kaminari’s eye for a moment.

“Of course!” Iida called out, looking hesitant. “We’ll put in all our efforts into these upcoming lessons. Right?!”

Iida turned to them, beckoning them.

A chorus rang out of agreements, the tension in Present Mics shoulders lessening.

Hanta felt himself relaxing.

Until he saw the copies sitting on the front desk.

Five copies.

These lessons weren’t going to be just for Eri. It was going to be for them too and all the people they encountered in their line of work. It was kind of a scary thought. What things would they learn?

Was the way they avoided news outlets and social Media platforms a bad thing? Avoidance? Toxic?

Was the way Ashido made jokes about herself bad or good?

The way Kirishima spoke too loud when he was anxious... what did that mean?

The way Bakugou isolated himself... forced himself to work out constantly... never gave himself a break... that was bad but in what way?

Was there things about himself that he would learn?

He often wondered if he made things worse by forcing them to the forefront and not allowing his friends to ignore issues.

Like the way he'd confronted Bakugou a bit ago.

Had he made the situation worse or better?

"How I feel doesn't matter at all."

He had a feeling in the pit of his gut that what the lessons would say about Bakugou would not be good.

Katsuki takes his computer downstairs with him, turning a lecture on for their upcoming coursework to distract himself as he carefully maneuvers about the kitchen, taking breaks and drinking lots of water as he cooks for himself.

It's hard.

If he's being honest with himself it's hard to move about. He's in the bad cycle. He needs appropriate food and water before he can work out. He needs to cook before he can eat. The hot fumes from the oven and the way his body shakes making that worse. He needs to work out to get his adrenaline down to stop the shaking so he needs to eat so he needs to cook so he needs to go slow. The hot-cold sensation of being out of his cycle hits him as his body's blood starts to flow with his movements, making it more clear how lightheaded he is.

Off balance.

The lecture grounds him. He's already heard this one on one of his runs. The skip in the lecture tells him how long each break is, how long it takes his body to stop shaking. It's not so bad though. The burnt food Sero brought up steadies him a little, at least, even if it wasn't what he needs.

He turns on the stove.

This part always makes him a little nervous.

Katsuki has never passed out while cooking in this state. But he's come close enough times that when the flames leap up to cook his

fish, he takes precautions. Sits down with a cup of water beside him and sips as he listens to the fish cook.

It's not good.

You're really supposed to watch to see the right color. The sizzling of the pan is loud in the empty dorms and really- Katsuki usually bakes his fish. It's healthier. But cooking in the over always takes so much longer and while he normally doesn't mind, right now he needs the damn fish to be done.

There's a baked potato from two nights ago in the fridge. The tin foil had been pried open and he'd put money on Kamari peaking at his food and not properly closing it. It won't taste as good since air had gotten in but Katsuki still warms in anyways. Because the carbs and starch are what he needs right now. The rice cooker beeps once, ten minutes before its ready and how the fuck had they messed up rice? There's broccoli steaming above the rice too. There's literally no effort to it. All he can picture are the idiots having no idea what the rice cooker is and attempting to make it over the stove instead. It makes him smile even as he shakes his head in exasperation at them.

It's the thought that counts.

They tried, at least.

His breaks get more frequent the longer he's down here, but he flips the fish and properly sears all the right places. The rice is cooked, the vegetables steamed, the potato stabbed and ready to cut open.

He practically folds into his chair after triple checking that everything is off.

This isn't acceptable.

The nightly panic attacks are messing up his routine. The added stress is messing up his body's already precarious chemical makeup. Unless he wants to keep crashing he has to fix this. He can't have his blood pressure dropping randomly all over the fucking place.

The others were bound to figure out Katsuki was a walking medical disaster if he dropped in the middle of the god damn training field. But taking sleeping meds was a sure fire way to kill him quick and he was already in therapy.

Fuck.

Katsuki's fork scraped against his plate.

He had remedial courses today.

"Are you absolutely sure you're feeling up to this kiddo?"

Katsuki sent Present Mic a withering glare.

"I'm peachy."

"You look like the pork bun Sato dropped yesterday," Todoroki said as unhelpful as fucking usual. "After Kaminari fell on it."

Katsuki sunk deeper into the car's backseat.

The treadmill had been hell. The walk back had been hell. Cooking lunch had been hell. His nap had felt like he steeped himself in hot oil. It was only now that his body felt like it was regulating correctly. And he did not need Todo-awkward-roki to give his less than two cents worth of commentary.

"Even if your... peachy," Mic said haltingly. "I'll be talking to Gang Orca about laying off the physical stuff today for you."

"That would probably be for the best," Todoroki intoned thoughtfully.

"Don't speak for me, Icyhot," Katsuki hissed. The fucking gul. Where did he get his balls?! "I can do whatever the course requires."

It would be best if he did, anyways. Katsuki wasn't stupid. He needed to rest, but he needed to burn off the excess more. He'd weaned down the adrenaline that came with a bad cycle but not the nitro part.

"No can do, little listener, we can't have you working in your condition, but Gang Orca's got some lessons outside of physical conditioning to teach you anyways."

Present Mic finger gunned him.

Katsuki took a deep breath. Then another. He glanced at Todoroki and god damn it. He didn't want to talk about this in front of the guileless Canadian flag but... He *really* needed to burn off.

"I *need* to be a part of this lesson," Katsuki told him.

"Your work ethic is noted, but it's still a very firm no."

Katsuki's hand twitched.

Fuck.

Shit.

"No," Katsuki leaned forward, catching his teacher's eye. "I *need* to be able to work out today." He kept his voice low, but even so he could see the half and half bastard turned slightly towards them. Damn it all. "I..."

He sent a venomous glare towards Todoroki. The blank look directed his way really pissed him off.

"Listen, part of why I..." *got sick*. Katsuki swallowed. Tried again. "My nitroglycerin has built up to dangerous levels. If I want to get better, I need to get it out of my system first."

Present Mic sat up straight, looking at him with wide eyes through the rearview mirror.

"How often does this happen?" Mic demanded.

Fuck.

He could practically feel Todoroki's stupid owl head turning his way.

"It's my quirk," Katsuki said carefully, trying to straddle the lines between getting the urgency across and not revealing how detrimental this could get. "It's always in the process of building up. I never let it build to dangerous levels though. I *always* get rid of it in training."

"Then how come you were sick yesterday?" Mic asked. Katsuki blinked at the sharp question, taken back. "Were you experiencing this... build up sickness yesterday?"

"It's not a sickness," Katsuki immediately replied, taken off guard by this uncharacteristic attention to detail.

"Explain it to me then."

Katsuki's mouth opened and closed, staring at his teacher in shock. He hadn't expected this kind of reaction from the teacher who had never

so much as glanced at him twice.

“It’s just... a chemical imbalance. I regulate it.”

“Your body doesn’t do that for you?” Mic asked, his forehead scrunched up in confusion over the obnoxious sunglasses.

Katsuki shook his head, pulling one knee up to his chest as his own exhaustion tried to topple him.

There was a noise. A throat clearing. His irritation spiked as he turned to see the owl had turned towards them, neck practically straining as mismatched eyes stared at him with an unreadable expression.

“I had... a brother who couldn’t regulate his own body temperature. He inherited father’s Hellfire.” Todoroki paused, his nose scrunching up and eyes distant. “He died because of it.”

Katsuki stared at the other, warring between being alarmed at the information itself and being VERY alarmed that the bastard would share that kind of shit out in the open.

‘Of course, the tragic backstory fucker could get more depressing.’

“Have you ever heard of oversharing?” Katsuki bit out, shooting Todoroki a glare.

The guy blinked at him.

“No.”

“Sorry to hear that, kiddo,” Mic interrupted them, voice subdued. Quiet. “It’s never easy to lose a loved one.”

“I was really young when it happened,” Todoroki admitted, eyebrows scrunching. “I don’t... really remember my brother.”

There was a hint of guilt in that voice. As if the fact that the guy couldn’t remember shit from the age he was still pissing himself was his fault. Katsuki rolled his eyes and looked away. Why did his classmates feel the need to tell him this type of shit? It wasn’t like Katsuki was even remotely the right person to know these things about other people.

“Sucks to be you,” Katsuki muttered. “Don’t go extrapolating weird connections between us through vague, unfounded similarities you make up in your mind.”

Todoroki shrugged.

“I just never considered that *you* have trouble regulating your quirk, Bakugou” the bastard said so easily. His eyes narrowing in that weird backwards concerned way that never failed to infuriate him. “You never seem to struggle in *that* way.”

Katsuki’s teeth grit.

“I don’t struggle with anything. It’s just a thing I have to do. Regardless, don’t go spreading it around,” Katsuki growled. “Or I swear I’ll rip your anus out of your body and shove it down your throat.”

Todoroki stared at him for a long moment.

“You haven’t cursed in a while...” Icyhot said slowly. Katsuki froze, watching Todoroki watch him. “I hadn’t noticed because you’re still as vile with your word choice as always. It’s... actually really impressive.”

Todoroki’s brows furrowed.

“But you haven’t actually cursed.” Those half-lidded eyes looked him up and down, his normal perpetual state of befuddlement now fully turned on him rather than the world around them. “Why is that?”

“I can speak in whatever way I want,” Katsuki gripped the car seat as he braced himself, letting a savage smile cross his face. “I’m eloquent as fuck.”

Shame and humiliation struck him hard.

His body stayed tense and rigid as Iida came at him. Leg aiming for his stomach. Landed. Katsuki felt himself hit the ground even as he knew he wasn’t moving. Heard the crowd roar its approval as the emotions that were not his washed over him.

He wasn’t there.

He was in the car going to remedial.

He was proving a point.

In a moment it was just him and Todoroki sitting across from each other on leather seats as Mic began to pull into the stadium.

“You’re just jealous that my vernacular is so extensive,” Katsuki bared his teeth, tempted to kick the other from his spot.

“Quite extensive,” Todoroki agreed, completely unphased by Katsuki’s words.

He rolled his eyes.

What a piece of work.

How was it that Todoroki was able to royally piss him off with so little effort? The guy didn’t even try. Katsuki stole a glance, squinting at the fucker suspiciously. At least, it didn’t seem like he tried.

Katsuki relaxed.

The day Todoroki was self-aware enough to understand the subtle underlying tones of the shit he verbally, periodically stepped in was the day Katsuki signed himself up for a therapy animal and called it a cutesy nickname.

Todoroki got out first.

Katsuki went to follow him when he found a hand gripping his shoulder.

“Nuh, uh,” Present Mic said quietly. “ ‘Fraid I still need some answers before you get out.”

Fuck.

Todoroki turned, eyes lingering on him as if to ask, ‘is this okay?’

Katsuki tsked. Sitting back down in the car and tilting his head towards the Hero Public Safety Commissions training field.

Todoroki folded, walking backward for the briefest of moments before turning and leaving.

“You two seem to be getting along much better,” Mic said, sounding surprised.

“Eh?!” Katsuki folded his arms. “He just ain’t welcome to eavesdrop and he knows it.”

“If you say so,” Mic said, but there was a smirk in his voice that Katsuki was not having.

"I do say so."

The man held up his hands as if in surrender, a smile on his face, but it lost its spark as the car was turned off. When they were alone, the teacher turned to him, looking far more serious than Katsuki was used to.

"So... tell me, Shota says yesterday was pretty serious. Are you saying it's a regular thing for you?"

His brows knit together.

Hardly.

Yesterday wasn't a big deal at all and he was getting sick and tired of people making mountains out of fucking nothing.

"It's not," Katsuki grit out. "I've never had it happen at school before and it won't happen again. I'll make sure."

Mic seemed to consider that for a moment as he looked him up and down.

"You live at school now," the man said, speaking in a careful tone, as if he were dancing around Katsuki's feelings. He hated that tone. "It's only been a few months, you know, so what I'm hearing is that you have quirk dangers that you haven't spoken to us about yet. Care to tell me why you would withhold that kind of information?"

"I'm not withholding it," Katsuki mumbled. "I'm managing it. I've always managed it. There's no reason to blabber on about a few quirk maintenance issues like some life-time drama."

Mic grimaced.

"The moment we took you guys into the dorms we also took on the responsibility of legal guardianship," the man told him. "It's literally our job to know things like this and to help you kids handle stuff."

Katsuki frowned at the man.

"I'm not some kid that needs my handheld and I'm not losing control of my quirk," Katsuki repeated firmly.

The fuck...?

Why was *this* an issue of all things? It didn't make sense. He wasn't

Deku breaking his bones every other day or Uraraka vomiting her guts out every time she overused her quirk. Mic sighed heavily, looking thoroughly exasperated by him, but Katsuki for the life of him couldn't understand what the guy's point was here.

"Because of my quirk I lost most of my hearing by time I was seventeen, you know?" Mic said, tapping his ears. "I'd done everything to prevent it. Protective gear. Regular doctor's appointments. Avoiding using my quirk unless it was really needed." Mic shrugged. "Sometimes the repercussions of our quirks can be devastating."

"Compared to Icyhot's tragic backstory yours sort of pales in comparison," Katsuki deadpanned. "Don't get things confused. I'm not telling you about my quirk bi-product because I need help managing. I'm only telling you so that I can do what needs to be done. Feeble-minded people with no self-control allow their quirks to control *them*. The strong adapt."

Mic blanched.

"Yikes. Okay. Tough cookie, aren't ya?" The man eyed him disapprovingly. "The point isn't to compare the awful things that have happened in each person's life, you know? It's..."

"An emotional appeal," Katsuki shot back. "A form of connection to manipulate the other person into giving you information."

Mic looked even more grim.

Katsuki decided to dig his heels in.

"I know you don't like me," Katsuki told the man. "Made that pretty clear at the Sport's Festival." Along with the rest of the world. "Reserve this thing you're doing here for people who need your teen spirit energy. What I need is to regulate my own chemical balance. I need about half a football field to do it properly. That's all *you* need to know."

Katsuki left the car, wiping at the sweat that had already collected on his brow and trying to still his shaking hands. Present Mic didn't immediately follow. Instead, the man held back, looking pensive with hands in his pockets.

That was fine.

Katsuki didn't need fake buddy-buddy energy. He didn't need adults who had shown him time and again they didn't like him to start pretending so now.

Katsuki could take care of himself just fine.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 22: Building Bridges

The good Doctor adds a dangerous layer of Association. It causes his classmates to really pick up on the fact that something is deeply wrong.

Building Bridges

Chapter Summary

New Association added.

Kirishima and Aizawa return.

I was doing the final edits when I realized I really didn't like how Kirishima and Bakugou's conversation went and basically scrapped the whole thing (-_-) And rewrote it. Thus why this is like two days after when I originally planned to post it. Lol.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 22: Building Bridges

“You’ve been doing well,” Dr. Kobayashi tells him after he’s thoroughly exhausted his nitroglycerin reserves and the others trickle into the cafeteria area.

She had been watching them train.

Sharp features unnoticeable in the shadow of a column where Katsuki had only spotted her after he’d started heading in that direction to the office area. He cringes as he stops beside her, those eyes zeroed in on him like some demented coyote starved of food too long.

“No cursing. The defiance is relatively under control. The association is working well then and while the readings given off by the ring have remained steady... at least thrice a day these past three and a half weeks, you tell me that you aren’t acting on those emotional impulses. Is that still holding true?”

Katsuki nodded.

“Then it’s doing its job.”

His mouth feels dry at her words.

“And what’s been the reaction of your classmates to this?”

Katsuki shrugs as they begin to walk to the office.

“Haven’t really been paying attention,” he admits.

“While I admit withdrawal does make things easier when it comes to meeting the goals of being less aggressive, it’s a short-term solution,” Dr. Kobayashi tells him. “The goal here isn’t to isolate you from society, Katsuki, it’s to get you involved in a positive way.”

‘Is that what you told my mom?’

The question sticks like glue in his throat. He still hasn’t really processed it. He’d thought Kobayashi had just taken it to the right people, the idea that his mom had been involved in this...

“Bakugou!”

They both turned to see Gang Orca walking up, the man was frowning at them. More specifically he was frowning at Dr. Kobayashi. The women’s eyes narrowed even as she smiled at the man.

“Hello! How can I help you?” She asked, pushing her glasses up as she tilted her head to look the Hero in the eyes.

The man shifted.

“I’d like to sit in on your session today, if that’s alright with Bakugou here,” Gang Orca said, eyes sliding over to Katsuki.

“Therapy sessions are a private matter, Gang Orca, you are more than aware of that.” Kobayashi said, voice lofty. “Every Pro Hero is required to do 50 hours of therapy sessions a year, after all.”

Oh.

Katsuki hadn’t been aware of that.

“That’s why I asked Bakugou, and not you,” Gang Orca replied, a little too cheerfully. “Each patient has the right to open up a session if they so choose.”

“That right is reserved for family members and friends, not strangers overseeing lessons,” Dr. Kobayashi replied, raising an eyebrow at the

man. "Are you secretly his biological father? Or have you, miraculously, become changed from his temporary mentor to his friend over the course of a few remedial training sessions? If so then my concerns have moved elsewhere to more legal reasons to say no and I must question if you need to be reported."

Damn.

She might be a right cunt, but she was a quick-witted, fast-moving cunt. He was almost impressed.

Gang Orca pressed his lips together as he stared the women down. Dr. Kobayashi was unphased by the man's ominous glare though.

"Sessions are confidential, if you wish to ask him questions and if Bakugou *wants* to answer them then that is business between yourself and him, but under no circumstances will I let you impede on the therapy session of a minor even if he agrees to it. If Katsuki wants to do group therapy, then that is up to him and can be implemented at a later date. As it stands our session starts now and you are wasting his precious time with me."

She turned, dismissing the Pro Hero as if he were no more than a fly.

Katsuki nearly gapped at her, instead, glancing back at Gang Orca.

"Bakugou," the man hurriedly whispered, "these sessions... you want to be at them, right?"

Katsuki's brow scrunched up in confusion.

"What?"

"These sessions were *offered* to you, right? You took advantage of them?"

Katsuki blinked at the man.

Didn't he know?

"They're required to get my license," Katsuki said slowly. "The HPSC required them of me."

The man's fists clenched.

"What?" Orca mimicked Katsuki, sounding utterly taken aback.

Katsuki's own confusion increased.

"That guy that designed the remedial courses you work with... Mera, he signed off on the paperwork months ago."

The man's smooth skin wrinkled for a moment. Katsuki imagined that he was more humanoid it would equate to his face scrunching up.

"We only put together the Remedial courses alternative after the Licensing Exam," King Orca said, his voice baffled.

Katsuki shrugged.

"Looks like your out of the loop then. HPSC has had this worked out for months."

"Katsuki, we have to start now, or you'll miss this session," Dr. Kobayashi said lightly.

Katsuki felt a shiver run down his spine.

He was suddenly reminded of the threat.

That if the sessions and remedial courses didn't work out, he'd be forbidden from ever becoming a hero. They'd strip away his ability to ever get a license. He swallowed and nodded, feeling his entire body tense as he walked forward to follow the women down the hall.

He didn't look back as they left Gang Orca in the halls.

"Build bridges, Katsuki," Dr. Kobayashi reminds him. "Build them nice and sturdy. Good relationships. Make people believe you've become a true hero. Just don't cross those bridges. Don't let them see you for who you really are. Be the hero everyone wants you to be. Not the Villain that you've always been."

This association runs deeper than the others.

The emotions are more devastating. A deep well of despair that is mind numbing if he slips up. It's more intricate too. It targets more

subtle habits. Yelling at people when they annoy him. Taking lead in group exercises or out and about. Confrontation. Katsuki's tendency to give inappropriate nicknames.

The black lines along his veins feel like it goes on forever as the line is repeated over and over again in a voice that makes his stomach turn.

“Build Bridges, Katsuki, just don't cross them.”

Build the Bridge. Don't cross it.

Kirishima is in the hospital- Deku too. Aizawa. Round Cheeks. Tsu. And Katsuki can't seem to remember the last thing he said to any of them. The news outlets had been running non-stop in the common room for once thanks to his classmate's obsessive natures. Like the news ever knows what is really going on.

On their way to remedial courses Present Mic isn't tense. He's not as talkative, but he's not tense either and that tells him things turned out okay even if maybe it was sketchy for a minute. All Might is nowhere to be seen. Probably with Deku.

It's tense silence in the dorms for a few days.

It's the girls that text first. Katsuki couldn't miss that if his life depended on it what with the way his classmates scream about everyone being 'alright.' No shit Sherlock. Bad news always travels faster. They'd have heard in the wee hours of the night if things had turned out for the worst. The news of Sir Night Eye had made the circles already. Some vulture making money off of the death of another hero no doubt.

But good news is always slow.

As if its hesitant to speak until things are absolutely, completely verified. And people forget, Katsuki thinks, once the relief of knowing the truth is out they forget that there are still people out there waiting for that information because *they* know and that's good enough. Because people are selfish assholes like that.

Round cheeks and Tsu both say that Deku's already up and about. The

nerd's phone had been taken from him after he'd been caught twice using it when he was supposed to be sleeping. Fucking typical.

Kirishima is in bad shape.

The sparkling brigade of positivity are already talking about how he'll be fine. How Kirishima is tough and nothing can get him down. But Katsuki knows that's a bold faced lie. He hates hope when its presented in such a ugly fashion. With grotesque colorful paper and obnoxious bows and tacky tags.

Build the Bridge. Don't cross it.

They aren't allowed to bombard the hospital with visitors.

It's *the* hero hospital in the nation and its designed with a bunch of safety precautions and quirk control safety measures for those with powerful quirks losing control when hurt or exhausted. There's talk of a 'special patient' there right now who was rescued.

Rescued.

There's something tight in his chest at that.

But the news outlets are silent about this rescued person. There's nothing about them one way or the other. No talk of how they deserved it or how the person was being recruited by the Villains. There's no heated debates about this rescued party brought it upon themselves or if they were some kind of victim.

There's a tiny bitter ball that forms in the pit of his stomach at the silence even as he's relieved. He feels alone more than ever though. Because if he ever meets this person, he doubts their situation will be comparable. They're a victim. Katsuki isn't. Katsuki's a by-product. Cause and effect. Not circumstantial. Not opportunistic like the Sludge Villain had been.

Katsuki sits stock still with everyone else on the third day...

Waiting for their healed classmates to walk through the door.

He lets Kaminari get too close. His muscles tense as the other yammers on about something or another. Ashido nervously prattles on in reply, she's been tossing a small meditation ball, that's surely Sero's, from hand to hand in an absentminded sort of way. Katsuki keeps waiting for it to miss and accidentally knock someone out, but

she doesn't.

They close in on him and it's hard to breathe.

He concentrates on the cloth of the couch. The smoothness of the table top against his knees. The soft warmth of Kaminari's skin against his own as the other leans against him dramatically every few seconds with something else to say.

Katsuki's not sure if he responds to anything.

He keeps blanking out.

It's only when the doors open, and he spots them that some of the tension leaves.

They look fine.

The others rush forward like a swarm of louses. They crowd into the group. Yelling and asking questions. Showering them all with attention and care. The four of them look overwhelmed.

Katsuki stands up, dodging Kaminari as the shorter blonde tries to pull him in. They're safe and here and that's all that matters. They don't need Katsuki to make matters more unsettled and tense.

"I'm going to bed."

Build the Bridge. Don't cross it.

Allow physical contact. Be involved. Speak when spoken to. Keep emotional distance. Don't speak your opinions.

He misses Aizawa slumping in, badly bandaged, looking around for him among his students and not seeing him. Misses Kaminari whispering that Katsuki had gone to sleep already. Misses the way Aizawa frowns but nods.

Katsuki's mom had been charged with assault. His dad had paid bail for her and was attempting to cool her down from her fury. The text message came in the middle of the night. His mom had apparently told the old man: "Fine, let him suffer the consequences of his actions

for all I care! Let him rot!”

She’s just angry and hurt, his dad had assured him.

They have a court date.

His dad will handle everything and make sure Katsuki’s life isn’t interrupted. He’ll testify for Katsuki. He promises. He’ll make sure that Mitsuki doesn’t go to jail, but he’ll protect Katsuki too.

He promises.

Katsuki knows this dance though.

His dad will try his best, but he isn’t strong. He’ll fold and word things in such a way to make it not sound bad. He’s surprised his dad hasn’t given the Hag his new number. He’s surprised that his dad hasn’t folded already and told her about the emergency card or Katsuki’s plans to not return home for the holidays.

His mom still doesn’t know or understand that Katsuki has essentially run away.

He blinks at the texts on his pay as you go phone. All the things his dad sent him, overexplaining his reasoning and insisting that things would work out.

Katsuki’s kind of numb to it.

He doesn’t really have any thoughts at all on the matter. For some reason thinking too deeply about the Detective (whose apparently on his own mission and can’t come question Katsuki just yet and for fucks sake the waiting is so much worse than the damn decision the man might make).

He can hear the others downstairs. It’s early morning on a Saturday.

He blinks at his ceiling as he considers what he should do.

He should pull out his work and study some more. Do some proper fucking work tonight since he’s basically wasted the whole day away.

“Your good at writing though,” Aizawa’s voice tells him. Katsuki turns over and looks at his desk, considering for a long moment before he forces himself to sit up.

How hard can it be?

Katsuki didn't mean to let it all get this bad.

That's one of the first things he wrote down. Not in a notebook. The idea of writing in a notebook makes him feel uncomfortable. Like he's copying the nerd and that doesn't feel right. Leaves him feeling agitated and hypocritical in all the worst ways.

Katsuki does something else entirely and it's kinda fucked, if he's being honest. It's kinda fucked but also sort of therapeutic in a way. Like... like he's stitching the other half of the story together on the other side.

He took a large pile of letters. Not the dangerous ones he wants to investigate later, but the ones that are just... screwed up. Letters from civilians blaming him for family member deaths. Letters from Pro's blaming him for All Might's retirement. Threats. Bullying. Sad letters and angry letters...

He takes a lot of those letters and he hole punched them. Flipped them over to the blank back. Used some knitting material he'd found to bind the pages together. On one side of this makeshift book are typed, handwritten notes about him, and on the other are Katsuki's thoughts.

At first, Katsuki responds to the letters. Writing down his thoughts to each hateful, shitty thing they have to say. Sometimes agreeing with them when they do have a valid fucking point, though most of the time tearing it down with all the logical viciousness he has in his head and in his chest.

But there are a few from way back during the Sport's Festival.

The first letters.

And Katsuki can't help but feel that, even though sometimes it's impossible to pinpoint the moment when all this shit started... the USJ? The Sludge Villain? Those feel like good starting points but they're wrong.

He thinks maybe it's the fight with Uraraka. The way the crowd had turned on him for taking her seriously. The way they'd seemed to look at him as if he was a monster. And maybe that would have been the case if it wasn't for Aizawa. If his teacher hadn't stepped in.

No.

The one that had condemned him was himself. When he'd told Midnight 'No.' And yeah, he blamed her too. He blamed Cementoss. To the point that whenever he had to train under them or near them, whenever he had to go to class with the two, he kept his head down. Eyes forward. Concentrated on his work. Even when they prodded or pushed.

He wasn't afraid of them.

But he'd be a fool not to be wary.

Trusting them or turning his back on them wasn't an option.

It strikes him then. Like a hot poker into his chest that no one, not a soul, has ever asked him *why* he was chained up. He doesn't even know what people *think* is the reason because Katsuki's never thought to ask.

He hadn't had anyone to ask back then either.

It was only after the Sport's Festival that the squad had started to hang out. Even he and Kirishima hadn't talked to each other much outside of nods of acknowledgement for working together during the USJ attack.

Everyone knows about what was done on the field. So he starts in that small waiting room where he'd argued with Midnight. The anger he'd felt at trying to be forced to receive a medal he didn't deserve. One that he hadn't earned.

He writes cliff notes too.

On the sides in different colored ink. Reflections, he calls them. To distinguish between his understanding of events then and now. He writes on sticky notes with what he's been told. How he should have reacted to the situation.

"I should have kept my mouth shut and just accepted it." He writes out. "What I want doesn't matter. How I felt about the medal doesn't matter. The awards were not to recognize our achievements but to show off the school's newest line of heroes. The Festival isn't for the students, it's for the general public to be introduced to heroes that will protect them."

That answer feels right.

It feels like he's tracking his progress this way, so Katsuki continues it. He writes about directly after the festival, being in the halls, completely worn down to the bone and having things thrown at him. That it was the first sign of how the general public viewed him. Not as the victim of the Sludge Villain, but as a Villain himself.

Aizawa was right.

It feels good to get all the complicated emotions out of his chest and head as he carefully writes it down. On papers that no one will ever see.

Denki twitches, looking around the room again. Where was it? Most of the class is downstairs. It's one of their dinner nights, coming together with different types of food and slapping it onto the table for a smorgasbord of treats and meals.

Tonight is more special than most.

They're celebrating after all.

Last night Midoriya, Ururaka, Tsuyu, and Kiri had come back alive and well if a bit morose from their super, secret mission they weren't allowed to talk about. They'd been glued to the news about the creep and the mafia or whatever the crazy bastards were called and all the heroes involved and...

It spikes the air again.

He whirls in the direction, his eyes scanning the carpeted floor and looking for outlets or broken electrical devices or a lightbulb that looks as if it's flickering out. He doesn't see any though. Doesn't feel any currents flowing in the air like that.

No.

The tiny little spikes don't act normal.

Normally if there is an electrical issue in the building there is a constant flow emitting from the source. Electricity doesn't just... flip on and off... at least not unless someone is flipping a switch on and off over and over and over again. Electricity will continue to emit as long

as it there is a connection or a wire is cut or, as he said before, a flip is switched.

Even Denki himself emits a tiny charge at a constant level until he literally fries himself into his 'off' mode, but even then... the natural electricity in electrical signals doesn't just cease. Those tiny, microscopic bits are what allow people to live and move.

But this tiny little spark is...

Flipping on and off. It's entire presence just... disappears within seconds. As if that's its job. Which really doesn't make sense. He doesn't know any kind of electrical device that's designed with the intent to turn off and on all day.

Maybe a camera that's designed to conserve power?

Takes a snapshot every ten minutes and then powers down?

Maybe it's part of the security system? It does a sweep of everybody in the room and then powers down? UA security is pretty tight. Especially since... well, especially considering everything.

"What's got you all bothered?"

Denki startles at the sound, glancing down to see Mineta standing there, eyeing him in confusion. He shrugs, looking around the room again for that weird electrical spike, but it doesn't come again.

It's probably not important. If it is a UA safety precautions, then far be it for him to question it. Besides, as long as the spikes were turning off then there was no real damage it could cause unless those spikes were right up against sensitive material or something conductive like metal or wires. There hadn't been any issues so far so chances were it was way above his head or it was supposed to be happening.

"Nothing man, what did you bring?"

Mineta smirked.

"Balls."

Denki gave him a deadpan look and the much shorter student chuckled.

"Takoyaki," Mineta explained. "I'm not the biggest fan of octopus if I'm honest, but there was a sale on some as I was coming back from

my internship and I know their YaoMomo's favorite." Mineta winked. "Maybe she'll be *nice* to me for it."

"She'll definitely be something," Denki said, amused. "Though since she could order a legion of delivery men to drop off a shipment of Tokoyaki if she wanted it, I wouldn't hold your breath."

"It's the thought that counts," Mineta muttered, puffing out his cheeks. "She's all about that."

True enough.

He fidgeted with his own addition. The cinnamon rolls don't seem as well thought out compared to the quickly filling table of nutritional, hot plates across the board. His effort seems lackluster now compared to his excitement when he'd picked them up that afternoon.

He set it on the table.

Unfortunately, it sat next to Bakugou's own addition. Denki almost picked it back up, not wanting the cheap sweets to sit next to the Sushi prepared from scratch and made in a variety of different fish and vegetables along the board. Expertly rolled. Not a sticky rice out of place.

Best to put his addition next to some of the sloppier dishes- but as he'd spotted Bakugou's plate and moved to pick up the cinnamon rolls, his eyes met his friends across the table.

Those red eyes were watching him.

He fucked up again.

Though this time he doesn't know-how. There's a look in Bakugou's eyes though, the way he looks at Denki, sees Denki moving his stuff away from Bakugou's... like... like Denki is rejecting him or something. Which makes no sense at all but that's the *look on his face*. Like he's resigned to Denki rejecting him.

It's *cinnamon rolls*.

He drops the container, letting the rolls fall back onto the table gracelessly, a clang that draws eyes. Denki smiles, waves, trying to be as casual as possible, but inside he's panicking. He's been nothing but 'foot in mouth syndrome' every time he's talked to Bakugou these last few weeks and to be honest, he's exhausted trying to say the right

thing while still being himself.

He glances at Mineta who shrugs at him in a 'what can you do?' sort of way. His friend rolls his eyes, frowning over at Bakugou. 'I don't see why you try,' his body language says. Denki frowns. He doesn't want to tell his friend that a lot of people feel the same way about Mineta but for completely different reasons. How many times he's had to give people apologetic looks and mouth 'sorry' when Mineta goes too far or says something that crosses a line. At least with Bakugou he just feels annoyed and not... uncomfortable.

He saunters over to the other blonde, slapping on a grin, but letting it drop at the sharp look Bakugou gives him. Right. Bakugou's like a lie detector on steroids when it comes to faking things. He takes it as a personal offense or something.

Denki fights rolling his own eyes this time.

Bakugou sits with a plate of food as far away from the others as possible and Denki follows him, sauntering over to his with as much confidence as possible and plopping down on the couch so close that their elbows are touching.

The tension is palpable.

"Kaaaaachaaaaan," Denki whines, trying to make his words as genuine as possible. "My cinnamon rolls look like a cheap joke next to your sushi. How did you even have the time?"

He leans in a little more, meeting Bakugou's eyes and trying to convey he meant no harm in trying to move his tray of rolls to a different spot.

Bakugou looks away from him.

Breaking the connection.

"Nobody dislikes Cinnamon rolls," Bakugou grunts, taking a bite of his food as aggressively as possible.

That's... okay, so that's like really round about way of saying his desert is perfectly legitimate to bring to the party. Nobody has ever claimed Bakugou's communication skills are his strong point.

"Awe, Blasty, that's so sweet," Denki gushes. "Looking at your food, I really felt like a screw up for a second there."

Bakugou pauses for a long moment, glancing at him.

“I didn’t actually make the sushi today,” Bakugou admits. “It’s my meal prep for the week. I made it all last night before I knew about this.”

“Wait,” Denki blinks at him. “Don’t you go to bed at like eight-thirty? When in the world did you make this?”

The electrical charge goes off again.

Denki blanches, surprise lighting his face as he looks around the room.

It had felt close. Really close. It had felt like it was right next to him. He looked at Bakugou, trying to... oh. That might be bad.

“Uh... Bakugou, I think your phone is broken,” Denki says, looking Bakugou, up and down. “Can I see it?”

The charge was too strong to be a phone, to be honest, but if it was malfunctioning and overheating, it could *possibly* cause that strong of a pulse. But Bakugou *should* have felt that.

“My phone?” Bakugou eyed him the way he hated to be looked at. Like he was dumb.

“Yeah, your phone,” Denki made a grabby motion. “It’s obviously fucking up. Its sending out an electrical charge it’s not supposed to. I’m surprised *you* haven’t noticed.”

Another electrical charge went through the air.

Denki shivered.

Bakugou didn’t so much as twitch at it though which... weird. It was hella strong. He was actually holding really still, come to think about it. He looked... unsettled.

“It’s fine. I don’t need you to fix it,” Bakugou told him.

“It could cause an electrical fire, Bakugou,” Denki told him, more serious this time. “It will only take me a second, I promise.”

“It’s not a malfunction. My phone’s supposed to do that,” Bakugou told him, looking completely serious at the bold faced lie.

Denki blew his hair out of his face, giving Bakugou a dry look.

“Um, no, look man, you know my quirk is electricity, right?” he said jokingly. “The only time I’ve felt a phone do something like that is while its chips are frying and it explodes.”

“The phones from I-island,” Bakugou informed him, eyes dark. “It’s on a whole other level. It’s supposed to do that.”

Denki frowned.

“An output like that should never be put in a phone. It’s not good and it definitely should not be discharging electricity like it is. Just... I swear it should only take me a few seconds.”

Bakugou stood up.

“I’m going back up to my room.”

“Wait! Hold up! It’s not that serious! You don’t have to leave.” Denki scrambled, standing up as Bakugou began to head out of the room.

“Hey, hey, where are you guys going?” Kirishima called, the redhead looked hurt and man oh man, Denki was tired of messing up.

He made a face at the redhead, hoping it said something like ‘I did a word vomit again, help me!’

Whatever his face said it wasn’t quite what he was hoping, because Kirishima just stood there. In fact, it was Bakugou who stopped, looking at Kirishima with something Denki couldn’t hope to decipher.

The electrical thing went off again.

Bakugou’s shoulders slumped as he put his hands in his pockets.

“Heard you helped Fatgum take care of a big shot Villain,” Bakugou said casually.

Oh man.

Oh man.

Was this the first time they were talking since Kirishima got back yesterday?!

Kirishima scratched at his cheek.

“Yeah, well, no, not really. I kind of messed up.”

Bakugou hummed.

“Want to spar?”

Kirishima’s eyes lit up with a manic grin. His fists pounding together.

“Hell yeah, I do.”

“You *just* got out of the hospital!” Denki barked. “And YOU” Denki pointed at Bakugou. “You’ve literally been sick! The fuck guys!”

They ignored him, already heading towards the doors.

“You can’t just leave your own party man! That’s not cool!”

Annnnnnnnd they were gone.

“The hell man,” Denki muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

A long arm wrapped around his shoulders. Denki pouted as Sero joined him in staring at the doors.

“It’s okay, man. No one can make sense of the language they speak,” Sero consoled him. “Let’s go eat Bakugou’s sushi before anyone else grabs it.”

“After this party, I’m taking a vowel of silence.”

“Sure, you are, buddy, sure you are.”

Eijiro followed Bakugou to their normal spot.

It feels like forever since they’ve been in that hallway though in reality only a few days have gone by. He’d left when Katsuki was sick. Fought a battle. Worked alongside heroes with ten times his merit and nearly caused Fatgum to lose in his battle even though the man says that Eijiro’s the reason they won. It doesn’t quite feel real to step back into his normal daily routine. To hear that a hero he’d walked into the building with is now dead.

If he’s honest with himself, as he always tries to be, he’s struggling with it.

Bakugou’s the only person he knows who truly gives him a straight

answer. Don't get him wrong. Mina. Denki. Hanta. All three of them will support Eijiro. They'll support the ever living shit out of him and give him all the love and care he needs. Their reliable like that. But if he's messed up they'll still tell him all the things he wants to hear but none of the things he really needs.

That's why Bakugou's his best friend.

Because if he messes something up Bakugou will tell him straight out that he has.

But he'll also help him figure out how to fix it for next time.

Like right now.

Bakugou's t-shirt comes off, his pants already breathable enough to retain dexterity and movement. Never caught off guard. Even his uniform is loose. Larger than it technically should be because Bakugou hates feeling restricted more than anything in the world.

Eijiro has to slip out of his shoes and take off most of his own clothes in order to spar. His pants come off and Bakugou just rolls his eyes at the Crimson Riot logo on them. He grins even as Bakugou shifts, getting into his fighting stance.

"So... tell me what's up."

Bakugou never misses the chance to strike at the heart of the matter. Or to strike.

The blonde moves forward like a lightning strike, jabbing at Eijiro's jaw. He almost forgot how these gym meetings work. He leaped back, putting distance between them. Eyes watching Bakugou as the other begins to circle.

"I messed up during the mission," Eijiro told him, taking three steps back for every two Bakugou tries to erase. "My hardening broke against a Villain. It only took one hit!"

His voice cracks.

Bakugou rushes forward, faking another jab before sweeping his legs out from under him. Eijiro rolls. When he gets his chest under him, he pushes up and uses his downed position to sent a hard kick at the approaching blonde who dodges easily, using a small explosion to propel him into a backflip before landing in a crouch.

“Did you get back up?”

Eijiro grunts as he pushes himself back into a standing position, eyes intent on the next move because he knows...

Bakugou is already moving. Coming in hard with a kick. Eijiro hardens instead of dodging, catching the leg even as he slides an inch or two. Bakugou uses his hold on his like a footstool to throw his other leg around Eijiro's waist before bringing both his hands up to Eijiro's weak point.

His neck.

The twin detonations are just big enough to loosen the grip he has on the blonde's leg.

He drops him, cursing as he steps back and clutches his neck on both sides.

There perfectly fine. Kirishima's hardening is smoking a little bit but there's zero damage because Bakugou's control is insane. Putting in the right amount of power to get his quirk to unravel.

It's maddening.

It takes him a long moment to refocus on what was asked.

“I got back up yeah, but it was only for a moment. It didn't even do anything other than a mild distraction.”

“Did you guys win?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it wasn't a mild distraction. Sounds like you're whining about not being as vital as you think you should have been. Which is dumb. Everyone that contributed to a victory was vital to the victory. All it takes is one negative point in your favor to tip the scales and lose the battle. Every positive point to tip the scale and win.”

Eijiro blinks at that, nodding slowly.

“You're right.”

“Of course I am,” Bakugou sent him a smug look.

Then it faltered.

It faltered horribly.

It was wiped off of Bakugou's face so fast that it looked as if he was struck by something. Eijiro went on the alert as Bakugou fell out of his fighting stance and stumbled. He was by his friend's side in the next few moments, steadying him as Bakugou took several long, deep breaths, eyes blown wide open.

"Hey, HEY! Bakugou, what's wrong?"

Bakugou shook his head, looking unable to answer.

"I'll go get Aizawa!"

A hand grabbed his wrist, holding too tight. He looked back to see Bakugou shaking his head again, baring his teeth at him as he gasped for breath. The blonde shook his head hard, enough that it actually looked painful before straightening.

Before Bakugou had looked excited, energized, now he looked... tired. He looked... Eijiro could hardly describe the beaten look on his friend's face. Like he'd just lost to Midoriya or something.

Like he'd looked on the bus ride home from the Licensing exam. Lost and distant and refusing to acknowledge any of Eijiro's prodding.

"Tell me what happened just then," Eijiro demanded.

"I got cocky," Bakugou muttered darkly, glaring at the ground.

He looked steadier on his feet. Eijiro swallowed as he tried to connect the dots but like many occasions, Bakugou said things that seemed to only make sense to him.

"Okay? What does that have to do with you nearly passing out on me?"

"I wasn't going to pass out," Bakugou tells him, firmly. As if this is the important bit. Whether Bakugou would black out and NOT the holy shit, somethings really wrong here part.

"That doesn't tell me what the hell just happened, man. I can't... I can't keep doing this," Eijiro bit his lip. "This... you... there's something wrong! Please, I'm begging you here, tell me what's going on so I can help you. I can't stand being sidelined like this."

"You don't need to do anything. The problems already being fixed,"

Bakugou said blankly.

“What does that even mean?!”

He shook Bakugou by the shoulders, the distant look in his friend’s eyes when he’d been so alert only moments before shaking him to his core. Bakugou frowns at the ground as if its hard to concentrate.

“Carving out bad habits and putting forward your best face,” Bakugou muttered under his breath. “She’s not really the metaphorical type.”

Eijiro squeezed the shoulders under his fingers, trying to get Bakugou to look him in the eye.

“Hey Blasty, its me, you know. It’s Eijiro. Do you know where you’re at?”

Bakugou blinked at him.

“Of course, we’re sparring,” Bakugou muttered, he looked up, but there was a weird thing going on with his eyes. Despite being right in front of him, it felt like Bakugou’s sight was gliding over him, not seeing him at all. “I wanted to see how you were doing.”

Eijiro felt hot tears edge at the corner of his eyes.

Bakugou blinked slowly.

“You’re always more honest when you don’t have time to think,” Bakugou told him. “You don’t try to hide by being cheerful when you’re fighting.”

Eijiro felt touched.

Bakugou was probably the only person who knew that about him. Appreciated it even and never asked or looked for Eijiro to be the cheerful one. He only wanted honesty. Which sucked since trying to get the truth out from his friend was the worst.

“Are *you* hiding?” Eijiro asked, unnerved by this weirdly complacent and talkative version of his friend. “The truth, for once, please?”

“People just don’t like the answers I give so they look for a different ones.”

“What just happened then, Bakugou, tell me. You know whatever you tell me, I’ll take it, even if I don’t like the answer.”

It didn't look like a panic attack or anything. Eijiro couldn't hope to figure out what the hell had just happened. The literal 180 in mood shift had looked like an attack of some kind though and it... it was possible Bakugou didn't know either. But if his friend had been suffering from these and didn't know what they were either then they needed to go to Aizawa about this immediately.

Suddenly all those quiet moments from his friend had a more dangerous edge to them. He swallowed as he watched Bakugou stare at the ground blankly.

"It's..." Bakugou's face scrunched up, looking as if pulling the words out was painful. Eijiro watched Bakugou press down on his wrist hard, digging his thumb into the meat there where the odd, random Q was drawn. "Today was supposed to be about you."

Eijiro let out a frustrated breath.

"Well, this is what *I* * want to talk about," he pressed. "This is what I want to do. Got it?"

"It's just a thing," Bakugou shrugged, "I just have to do it."

...

Not anything Eijiro had been expecting. That was for sure. He felt out of his depth but like hell would he drop it after he dropped the hallway incident. The way he'd dropped Bakugou overworking himself into sickness or the way he'd starved himself for three days after failing the licensing exam.

"What type of thing? What are you doing?"

Bakugou pressed down on his wrist again, a bruise was starting to form, the skin red and rubbed, Eijiro found himself grabbing his hand and pulling it away. His friend's eyes tracked it; gaze now drawn away from the Q to stare at their hands.

"Therapy," Bakugou whispered so quietly Eijiro almost missed it, like he was ashamed.

"Um..." He blinked, trying to wrap his mind around that. "How long and... look man... maybe I'm dumb but... what the hell does seeing a therapist have to do with... with whatever *that* was?"

Bakugou remained silent.

“Do you mean like... you’re going to therapy to help with it? Is that what you’re trying to get at? Because I’ve never seen that before. Has this been something you’ve been dealing with?”

He was probably overwhelming him with the questions, but the silence was driving him near crazy with worry.

“One of the things I’ve been dealing with,” Bakugou told him, a look of distaste and apprehension breaking through the blankness from before. He looked more alert now. More aware of his surroundings. Bakugou rubbed his shoulder, looking up at the ceiling for a long moment. “Listen... I don’t want this getting back to the others.”

“Tell me what’s going on and I *might* consider that,” Eijiro told him, trying to copy his mom’s no-nonsense voice.

Bakugou grunted.

“You know how me and Todoroki have been going to remedial...?”

“Course,” Eijiro nodded.

Bakugou grimaced.

“Well, I was told that I have to do therapy sessions if I want to ever get my license- for my public image and aggression and stuff.”

Eijiro stared at him in confusion. It made sense, Bakugou had failed the Exam because he was too aggressive towards the would be victims. The idea that it might be a stipulation alongside the courses actually sounded good. He still didn’t get what that had to do with the weird blanking out, compliant thing before. Wait...

“Why’d you call him Todoroki?” Eijiro asked, folding his arms across his chest as he stared at his friend. Bakugou has never once called Todoroki by his name.

Bakugou shrugged.

“Carving out bad habits.”

Eijirou stared.

“Carving out...” Eijiro mumbled, staring at Bakugou liked he’d never seen him before. “The nicknames are your *thing*. What are you even talking about...?”

“It’s part of the program,” Bakugou mumbled. “Just a stupid set of rules I have to follow.”

“Rules?”

That didn’t really sound like Therapy. Eijiro wasn’t really familiar but wasn’t it more like exercises that people were supposed to attempt? This sounded... less like therapy and more... controlling.

“What kind of rules?” Eijiro pressed.

Bakugou’s face contorted. It almost looked painful. He shrugged again, a full body motion that pulled Eijiro’s still attached hands with him.

“Just... rules centered around goals made. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“And one of them is not giving people nicknames?” Eijiro asked in bewilderment. “That’s dumb.”

“About being more respectful,” Bakugou grimaced as the words left his mouth, glaring at the ground.

Eijiro felt distinctly uncomfortable now.

Maybe to some.

Bakugou’s nicknames weren’t always disrespectful though and that didn’t really feel like... well its not like Eijiro was an expert or anything but...

“What other kind of ‘rules’ do you have to follow?” Eijiro demanded.

And yeah...

Okay, yeah...

That was the problem.

That’s what was bothering him about this. This didn’t seem like it was meant to *help* Bakugou at all. It felt like... Why was it rules in the first place? Weren’t therapists supposed to have people do like... exercises? Practice. Experimentation. Seeing what worked? This felt... felt like it was different.

Bakugou shrugged. Looking off to the side, not meeting his eyes.

The ‘not right’ feeling increased.

That wasn’t like his friend.

He was so used to seeing those deep wine red eyes glaring into him whenever they talked, to feel them sliding away, avoiding looking at him for this conversation...

“What **rules**, *Bakugou*?”

Eijiro had hardened, that gravely quality coming to his voice as his quirk wrapped around his throat. He reached out to his friend.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk about it!” Bakugou growled.

And then he flinched.

Eijiro paused, his hand still midair, hovering over Bakugou’s shoulder. His brows scrunched up as he eyed Bakugou suspiciously.

“**What the fuck was that?!**” Eijiro growled, his voice cracking.

He wasn’t just angry. He felt hurt.

Hurt and tired.

He was tired of seeing Bakugou refusing to even acknowledge that anything was wrong. Refusing to reach out for help. Looking utterly exhausted all the time and pushing himself when everyone would be more than happy to help... to do something.

“**You can’t... you know you *can’t* keep going like this, right?**”

“I don’t have a choice, its mandatory,” Bakugou muttered. Red eyes glanced at him, adding morosely. “I just have to get through it.”

Eijiro’s skin smoothed out as he calmed a bit.

“What kind of rules are they making you follow?” Eijiro asked again, moving when Bakugou tried to break eye contact with him, so the other was forced to keep contact. “At least look at me if you’re gonna try to lie.”

“I don’t lie,” Bakugou spat, a small flinch going through him again.

Eijiro tried to spot where the blonde could be hurt, his eyes lingering on one spot in particular.

“Did you sprain your ankle?” Eijiro asked.

“What?”

Brows furrowed.

“Your ankle. You keep flinching and you’re lifting your foot up a bit like it hurts to stand on. You hurt it, didn’t you?” Eijiro’s mind thinks back to their fought but as far as he remembers Bakugou had been dodging and weaving him with ease. There had been no point where Eijiro had gotten an advantage, or the other had stumbled.

Bakugou frowned at him and put his full weight down on his obviously hurt side, as if to prove some sort of point and Eijiro felt the incredible urge to slam his face into the wall out of pure frustration.

“Aren’t *you* the one whose always lecturing us about taking care of ourselves?” Eijiro demanded. “You’re being a hypocrite.”

“I’m not injured,” Bakugou told him, he looked like he was chewing on the inside of his cheek. “It’s just a really bad rash on my skin. It’s chafing. I’m not an idiot. I know not to ignore injuries.”

“Right, you just ignore when your sick.”

Silence filled the room between them. Tense and unlike how they usually interacted with one another.

“I wasn’t sick.”

“Oh. My. God.” Eijiro let his hands drop and walked away, letting out a breath of frustration as he paced in place to do *something* with the anxious energy wrapping around him. He couldn’t look at his friend without becoming genuinely angry.

“No, I...”

“I *don’t* want to hear any lame excuses,” Eijiro cut in, sending his friend a sharp glare.

Bakugou stood there, his eyes wide, shoulders slumped.

And then he mumbled something.

“What?” Eijiro turned towards him, stopping his pacing. “Speak up!”

“Its Quirk Drawback,” Bakugou spoke clearly this time, but there was

a grimace in his voice, like admitting the information was physically painful for him. “I haven’t been keeping on top of it like I should. So I... I crashed.”

“I don’t know man. It sort of sounds like you got yourself sick. Which is still being sick.”

Eijiro let his arms drop, finally, stepping closer to show that he was willing to listen.

Bakugou shoved his hands in his pockets.

Shrugged.

“I told Present Mic,” Bakugou admitted. “About some of it. The important bits, anyways.” Bakugou doesn’t look happy about it. He looks pissed off actually. “He’s a snitch so Aizawa will probably know sooner rather than later.”

“You’ll probably have to sit down with Aizawa then. It’s gonna be a whole thing,” Eijiro guessed.

Bakugou’s face scrunched up.

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to have to tell Aizawa all the details.”

“I know.”

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“...you want to practice?” Eijiro offered.

Bakugou’s shoulders slumped.

“No.”

Eijiro smiled, sitting down on the matts, and waited patiently as Bakugou stared at him, gradually, his friend slumped down on the matt too.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 23: Don’t Cross

Katsuki takes up Aizawa’s suggestion about telling his story with more gusto, writing it on the back of the letters sent to him and encounters Camie- The League of Villain member he let get away during the Licensing Exam.

Don't Cross

Chapter Summary

Chapter 23: Don't Cross

Katsuki takes up Aizawa's suggestion about telling his story with more gusto, writing it on the back of the letters sent to him and encounters Camie- The League of Villain member he let get away during the Licensing Exam.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 23: Don't Cross

When he comes back to the Letters book he's made, it's not as straightforward as the first ones he wrote before.

He breaks it up further into increments.

Tuesday, he writes about the first letters coming in, how the letters had caught him off guard. Confused him. He makes notations here; that his mom was right that this was inevitable. That sooner or later people would recognize and want to carve out who he was as a person. That he recognizes now that he isn't what people want in a hero. [Not that he will let that stop him, but he recognizes it.]

Wednesday is harder.

He tries to write about the first stalking bit. His words sit (ironically because why the fuck not?) on the back of Dr. Kobayashi's first letter and the back of the prestigious letter with the little certification crest at the top ends up with a dozen beginnings scratched out. He gets overwhelmed. Writes out all the texts he remembers reading on the back of that page, over the crossed-out words until there's more black ink than white paper.

He tries again on Thursday. This time on the back of a Hero Agency that asked him to consider another career field. The back of this one too ends up more scribbled words of half-remembered threats and a shoddy drawing of the picture he remembers of him and Deku. The

one that had the shitty nerd mostly cropped out.

He writes instead of what he thinks of that damn picture.

Of Uraraka's question about why he's always so angry with Deku. He writes about how absurdly irritating it was that it was all so impossible to explain. He writes about Auntie Inko and his mom. The way his mom was constantly bringing Deku up- comparing him to Deku. The way his mistakes were always being rubbed in his face what felt like anytime he ever spoke to his mother. How he was always lacking something. How Katsuki had been 'wrong' since as long as he could remember. The expectations that Katsuki would succeed but there *would be* a fall and *everyone* would enjoy watching that fall. (That Kamino had been the climax of that fall and now everyone was enjoying watching him burn).

He writes until there's no more natural light in his room and what's left on the page is a mess of half-baked explanations that he's sure that no one else could make out. Until his fingertips are black with ink. And if anyone could read it, they'd probably be more disappointed in him. Not less.

He closes the makeshift book of letters and thoughts, and he doesn't open it again for nearly five days. Until all the hidden bandages on Kirishima are off and Aizawa looks fully healed up and everyone else seems whole and safe even though he sees the way All Might has slumped shoulders and Deku's eyes look wet at times- he's heard the news of Sir Nighteye.

Another thing he'd missed- somehow.

When he does open it up again, on a Thursday of the following week (Aizawa finally back from his multiple trips to the hospital and now eyeing him up like Katsuki's a particularly interesting piece of meat he's about to flip on the grill) it's not hard to see the messy scrawl of rushed writing he would never allow his schoolwork to be. He marks a line across the paper, intending to write underneath it, but he stops.

Deku was an easy comparison for the Hag. He was the only part of my life she was familiar with.

That feels right. He hadn't really been thinking when he wrote it, but

it feels right. His mom wasn't a reader. Not like Katsuki. She hadn't had any interest in listening to him talk about his books on Superheroes and Zombies or Barbarian Warriors. She only liked that it kept him out of her way. She didn't like to hear about how well he was doing in school or what he had accomplished. He'd learned that a long time ago.

In her fondest moments, she'd ask him how training was going. She'd tease him about his preferred style of dress. Teach him tricks to be better at social interactions. Their arguing would take on a more peaceful playfulness to it [still aggressive if looked at from the outside].

As he self-studied how to engineer gear to maintain his costume, she talked clothes design. The extra lessons his parents made him take like learning the drums or sign language or tech was designed to get him out of the house when they were home. He didn't really understand that then. More resentful of the fact that he didn't want to take them and he'd wanted to do his own thing than aware.

That awareness had come with age. He's not exactly sure when he realized why, only that he'd gone from looking forward to his parents coming home to hating it because he knew he wouldn't be seeing them anyways and when he did- well, it wouldn't be good.

He goes to the next page.

The clean slate.

A fair distance from the messiness that is his life [away from thoughts of his mom or Deku or his dad or... or any of that nonsense]. He spends that evening going over his experience at Best Jeanist's Agency.

How he'd thought he would be meeting an adult that had scouted Katsuki because he genuinely saw potential in him in a hero and how it had... Katsuki will only admit to this page of letters... how it had broken his heart that it was a lie.

Again.

That it had broken his hopes of ever finding an adult that believed in him and if he wanted to move forward then it would mean relying on only himself. Because All Might... Best Jeanist... both of them thought he was fucked up in some way. That he was almost a good fit to be a hero- he just needed to get a new personality. Just needed to not be

himself in order to be *the* perfect hero.

How a bit of that hope had returned with Aizawa even though Katsuki wanted to make sure to keep his distance. He refused to be tricked again. Refused to really believe it was true. There was a ticking time clock on the kindness, Katsuki knew, and it was a guessing game when it would hit zero.

Katsuki writes about his experience with Jeanist's sidekicks and the way his mom had reacted- about her finding a letter from Dr. Kobayashi. His fingers are stained black from the end of it, ink at the tips and skin sore from squeezing the pen too tight.

It feels nice to have some of this stuff out of his head though.

It looks worse on the paper too.

Katsuki stares at the timeline and its sort of overblown really. He's had a shit year and that thought sort of cracks him up. His mom was a god damn prophet. All the things that she'd proclaimed over the years had been right.

He writes those down too.

Knocked from his pedestal.

Beaten by those who were stronger than him.

People will turn on him. Hate him for who he is.

Katsuki will fail at being a hero.

No matter how hard he tries, he'll never be good enough because he doesn't know how to change. There's just something Katsuki is missing that everyone knows about but no one can quite name. Not even his mom.

It's like a checklist. His own personal checklist Katsuki had adamantly ignored for most of his life and tried his hardest to avoid. Tried his hardest to prove her wrong. That Katsuki could be a hero with his personality. That Katsuki could stay at the top if he worked hard enough and utilized his straight-forward power quirk in more intricate, creative ways to do more than just blow people up. To prove that he wasn't just a power-house but someone who could adapt and use fine tuned control to be reliable in all sorts of situations. Katsuki had put his whole heart and soul into becoming the best hero he could

be and...

And it wasn't enough.

"Villains scouted you. Villains, Katsuki, and you can't delude yourself into thinking it had anything to do with your godforsaken talent or strength."

He supposes the first person to really hate him was his mother.

To be everything she didn't want in a kid.

What had she wanted? A social butterfly. Someone who had a backbone but who didn't fight her. Someone who was kind and generous but not so much that they were easily stepped on. Good at academics but only if they were humble about it. Good at everything but only if they didn't think so themselves. Perfect, but only if they didn't think themselves perfect.

Yeah...

Katsuki's pen stills on the back of the page, a black dot slowly forming to stain it on the front and back as ink spills out from the pressed down tip. Huh. Katsuki stares down at the page for a long moment... it sort of sounded like Yaoyorozu.

It makes him wonder if that's how she naturally is or if her parents forced her into that personality after years of training. She probably had some form of natural inclination towards it. Her social butterfly nature seemed pretty natural, if awkward, like she didn't have much experience in it.

Her power is lacking though, hilariously the opposite problem of Katsuki. It's depressing how much they reflect each other, actually. Katsuki finally lifts the pen off the page, staring at the black well of ink that's still expanding as it eats up more paper.

She might have been sent to U.A to fix that deficiency.

The humor drains out of him.

Everybody's got their own shit to deal with and Katsuki makes an effort to not involve himself with those things. (Even though Deku often spouts out his drama to Katsuki's unwilling ears and Todoroki likes to talk about his drama in the hallways where any unfortunate soul can overhear toxic family shit going down). Katsuki is the least

qualified to deal with anyone else's bullshit and oversharing is detrimental to his health and theirs. Katsuki acknowledges this truth about himself.

No one else seems to.

Besides, Yaoyarozu already has an entire task force working as a support system. She'll be fine. She was built to be the perfect social butterfly...

Warm blood has gathered in his mouth.

Katsuki spits it out in irritation.

He'd still been biting down on his cheek without realizing it.

There's a knock on his door. The familiar in-person text message that is Icyhot.

"You're late. You were supposed to be downstairs ten minutes ago to head to remedial training."

Katsuki takes a deep breath and shoves the letters beneath the bed.

He joins Icyhot and together they go downstairs...

Only it's not just Present Mic waiting for them this time.

It's also All Might.

The man smiles at him.

This is the first time he's seen the man since... since his mom...

Katsuki looks away, adjusts the strap on his shoulder again.

"Let's go," he mutters to Icyhot, feet treading towards the bus.

"Okay," Todoroki replies, blinking owlishly after him. "But you shouldn't act like we were the ones holding *you* up."

Katsuki's eye twitches, just a little.

"Oi! U.A!" The obnoxious voice catches their attention, as always. Katsuki feels his muscles tense at the formidable, if slightly moronic

first year from Shiketsu comes down the hallway towards them. Every Flippin day he gives an enthusiastic hi to the Half and half bastard- and has been somewhat acknowledging Katsuki's existence for the last few weeks as well. Katsuki didn't think he'd mind it so much if the bastard would just pick an emotion to feel. The back and forth between friendliness and hostile intent put him on edge.

He hears her before he sees her.

"Oh, what's this?"

The familiar face comes into view.

"This guy's super-hot, that's like totally crazy." Her eyes are on Todoroki and Katsuki feels the urge to step forward and put himself between this bitch and his classmate. To make them both step back. "I'm like, totally psyched to train with such a hot guy."

Katsuki takes a step forward, heat in his hands rising in his pockets, he takes them out to stop them from destroying his uniform, keeping his focus on her. She's... there's something off. She doesn't feel the same. Not in the way she stands or speaks.

"Camie!" Meat guy from before is here too. "As a student of Shiketsu, you should throw away things like that."

Students not involved in the remedial training at all. Why were they here? Why was *she* here? He keeps his mouth shut, moves in front of the Icyhot bastard as he glares at all of them. But mostly he keeps his eyes locked on Camie.

The possible League of Villain member. The one Katsuki had let get away because he'd hesitated. Not trusted himself. He's thought long and hard about that moment on the bench. The way she watched him... the questions she'd asked- provoking, taunting, knowing. The words she'd left him with.

We see you.

The room is narrow. It's not the best place for his or Icyhot's quirks. He's pretty sure Gale boy would make a shitty back up here too. Meat guy is disgustingly obnoxious and arrogant, but he also might be the best bet if Katsuki were to expose her here and start a fight but...

"Why are you here?" Katsuki growled out.

Camie startles, his eyes sliding from Todoroki to Katsuki as she blinks at him. There's no recognition in her eyes. The familiarity he'd felt with her that first time they'd met is nowhere to be found.

He's *sure* this is her, but he hadn't been paying much attention before he'd realized she was a part of the LoV and after she'd already slipped away. He remembers the uniform for damn sure but...

"You don't need to explain yourself to the likes of him," Meat guy snarls, eyes narrowed. "He's just a punk. Your reason for having to lower yourself to remedial training is actually legitimate."

Katsuki doesn't take his eyes off of her as she starts to look uncomfortable.

"You failed the first test," Katsuki says slowly, speaking to the meat guy, but never- not for a damn second, does he take his eyes off her, "you shouldn't be here either."

"I've been given permission to observe!" He snaps back.

That explained him, but not her. She was joining the remedial 'course? This late in the game? Was she targeting him? Here to watch him? Katsuki does step in front of Icyhot now, his hands sparking off more loudly. Fuck that.

Fuck her.

Fuck this.

Her eyes widen as the rest of the room goes on red alert.

Her features were soft. The hard edge he remembered from her completely gone.

Everything is conflicting from before and then but... But Katsuki REFUSES to be at fault again because he didn't take action.

"I didn't get to take the first test," Camie says hurriedly, "so they decided to throw me in here with you guys!"

Katsuki's eyes narrow on her.

"But you were there. You took it with us."

He doesn't mean to let the anger slip in. The deep seeded hatred. But it lines his voice thick enough that both the Shiketsu boys' tense forms

go defensive in their body language. Aggressive. He feels the latest association dig into him at his anger- at his arrogance. In an instant it's as if he's been dropped in freezing water. His limbs won't respond to his demands and there's a blankness that seeps into his mind, wiping all of his emotions away. Leaving only facts and thoughts.

He's already unnerved his classmates though.

Inasa goes so far as to pull Camie back and away from him. He feels Todoroki shift behind him as well. Camie's eyes have blown wide as she reexamines him.

"Someone used a quirk to take my place," she explains, less cheerful now, more subdued. "I don't really remember it so if they did something to you, I'm sorry."

So, it had definitely been someone from the LoV.

Katsuki fights the association trying to push him towards complacency. This isn't the time for that. It's not the time for forced calmness. Katsuki's lips press together as he closes his eyes and thinks, now that he has the knowledge that it had been one of them- how was the person familiar?

A sharp smile.

Taunting. Mocking.

Too calm to be Shigaraki. Not Twice or Dabi. Not Magne. She wouldn't have left it like that. She'd have tried something, he's sure of it. Not Spinner. He wasn't the stealth or deceptive type. It could be the Magician?

No. Compress was playful. Dramatic.

This one had been vicious. Intent.

Toga.

Fuck.

He opens his eyes, feeling wariness as he stares at Camie's face staring back at him. He can't seem to quite focus on her- the cold, numb feeling and ice almost makes it like he's seeing her from a distance. Like she's not quite solid to him anymore.

Yeah, yeah it had been fucking Toga. That familiar uplift of the lips,

the playful taunting tone as she talked about terrible things. Leaning in too close to his personal space. Saying things softly as if it were some kind of fucking secret between them.

“...ugou!”

Katsuki turns, eyeing Todoroki whose looking at him with a pale face. He feels it then, weight on his arm and looks to find that the other has his fingers wrapped around his forearm and had been shaking him. Hard. There's frost on his skin.

“What happened?” Icyhot demanded. His voice is sharp and commanding and he's sure there's a lot of extras that would jump right on that. The association is fading though. He yanks his arm away, stepping away from the group that's looking at him with alarm—even Meat guy has his trap closed.

“Even if you're not Toga, I don't want you near me,” Katsuki told her.

“How did you...” Camie began to speak, but Icyhot cut in, shocked, voice becoming louder as he spoke.

“Toga? From the League of VillAINS? BAKUGOU! THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU? Why didn't you SAY anything?” Steam was rising from Todoroki's right side, a clear sign of his agitation.

Katsuki glared, his hackles rising.

“Believe it or not, she didn't *announce* she was from the League, she just said stuff that made me think the League *might* have sent her.”

The Association is rearing its head again.

He takes a few deep breaths, trying to push it away, but it claws into his heart, making it feel as if he's been submerged in icy depths. He shivers. Todoroki's arms twitched, as if he were very close to throwing his arms in the air like Deku tended to do when he was done with someone in an argument. Or maybe even the way Iida's more robotic movements slashed the air in agitation.

Katsuki swallows as the other students move toward him.

He feels trapped.

Unable to move.

“And you didn't think that was important enough to tell someone?”

Meat guy demanded, sounding hoity as fuck, his holier than thou voice on full display. “That there might be someone working for the League of Villains among students?”

Like Katsuki had *let* it happen.

Like Katsuki had caused it.

Something ugly crawls up his throat and he already feels his ankle beginning to sting. Already feels the blaring, clawing association digging into him, but he’ll be damned if he lets some... some fucking stranger who knows *nothing* about him blame Katsuki for shit like this... Not when he already blames himself for so many fucking things.

Not this.

He snaps.

“Do ANY of you have a clue how many people say shit like THAT to ME?!” Katsuki snarled. Fear struck him. Sero’s tape wrapped tightly around his arms as his hands exploded. Going inwards instead of outwards. He was thrown backwards and hit the ground hard. A grim smile sat on Sero’s face. His lips were moving but Katsuki couldn’t hear it. More tape wound around his ankles and he found himself falling...

The bracelet shocked him. He felt the electricity go manic as it hit him again and again.

The hallways of the remedial courses realigned itself in front of him. He grabbed his own wrist, pressing down hard on the smudged Q to orientate himself faster. To focus on the people in front of him instead of the false Sero staring down at him in sheer disappointment.

He swallowed at the alarmed faces watching him. The stricken look on Icyhot’s face. The looks of startlement on the League’s agent... on Camie’s face. He pressed harder.

“Do you know HOW MANY people come up to me and tell me I caused All Might’s End and that I should have stayed with the League ‘cause I would have caused LESS damage that way!? **FUCK YOU!**”

Shame and humiliation attack him like stepping on a sticker in the carpet for the tenth time that day despite avidly avoiding them. Iida’s leg swung out towards him. Katsuki almost stumbled back. He’d

forgotten. He swings away from the group as the image plays in front of his eyes. Why did Iida have to be associated with his most frequent curse? God damn was that annoying. He tries not to duck under it like is his natural reaction.

Katsuki breathed heavily as the others stare at him in shock, much further down the hall than before. He feels the cold, icy despair consuming him of the deeper association. It's like a deep hopelessness... the idea that this will never end. He feels himself slipping into it. The complacency and numbness.

He grits his teeth, biting the inside of his cheek as he glares at them all (he doesn't think it comes across as a glare, the association already has too strong of a hold on him). The numb feeling in his legs makes it impossible to move. They all look as if there's a great distance between him and them even though he knows that isn't true. In the same way he'd known Kirishima was close to him, even though it had felt as if he was still far across the room.

He breathes deeply, counting to himself and naming off the things in the room.

From the dumb, pretentious hats Shiketsu is wearing to Icyhot's scar and mismatched hair. He notes it all before the feeling finally gives him enough control to get the ever living fuck out of there.

It takes him a long time to realize Todoroki is gripping his arm and that his lips are moving in front of him. He shrugs his shoulder, making the others hand fall away. Icyhot looks at him in an odd way, hand half raised and eyes wide. He stumbles away, ignoring Todoroki calling after him.

Like hell is he gonna stick around to be interrogated some more.

When Katsuki gets to the lockers, he holes himself away from Inasa and Todoroki as well as the extras who failed because of a lack of training. He's *not* hiding. He just doesn't want to deal with their annoying prattle is all. The despair claws at him like a second skin and it just makes it *hard* to look at them. He hadn't considered that the associations would be doubling up on each other and this... this sucks.

It's as he heads towards the stadium that he passes a hero heading towards a familiar door. The man has a ring around his bicep. A very familiar ring that catches Katsuki's eye. It glows a subtle white.

He stops, eyes lingering on the device.

It's not his day for therapy.

For some reason, he hadn't really thought about what she'd said about seeing other heroes. The man doesn't stop or pause. Katsuki doesn't recognize him at all. He can't say what his hero name is or what his rank is. Which is odd because... he's not on Deku's level but Katsuki keeps up with the heroes list pretty adamantly himself. This hero is completely unfamiliar to him though.

No eye contact at all.

The man keeps his head down, looking at the floor with intense concentration.

Katsuki lingers for only a moment more before he heads in the opposite direction towards the stadium.

It's none of his business what kind of bullshit full-grown adults buried themselves in. Only his own bullshit. Katsuki forces his chin up and keeps his head held high as he walks towards the entryway.

He won't let them turn him into *that*.

The kids are little monsters. They're so fucking awful. Suddenly he thinks he might be able to give himself a mental pass for not being the best kid out there because holy fuck. These were genuinely making him look mild in comparison to the few fights he's gotten in over the years.

He keeps his distance from Camie. Reminding himself that she's not Toga time and again, but actually being able to accept it are two very different things and Katsuki is already dealing with too much shit to consider adding her mouthy ass to the pile with her stupid big eyes staring at him like she was to have some deep fucking conversation about what just happened.

Katsuki's noping out of that shit.

So he avoids her.

She notices. Some of the light in her eyes dimming any time she glances at him. Hands folded behind her back as she starts to avoid looking at him altogether too. Until he *feels* Icyhot's annoying fucking

presence go from somewhat tolerable because of distance to right fucking next to him, 'I want to have to have an awkward conversation in public' type stance.

"No."

"Bakugou," Icyhot says ignoring his words like everyone else in his life, he's got five little monsters grabbing ahold of him, who have already renamed the bastard as five wee-wees- which, honestly? Golden blackmail material for later if he ever tries to share this shitshow with the class. Course, Icyhot might not even recognize what's wrong with sharing this kind of shit. "I wasn't aware you were still dealing with things from Kamino."

'Does this look like a place for a heart-to-heart you god damn halfie?!'

Katsuki takes a deep breath as he feels a shock run up his leg.

Today was not his day.

"We've got better things to do right now," Bakugou tells him. Fuck. He let one thing slip to Present Mic of all fucking people and now it feels like his tongue is loose with everything lately. Like the last association was somehow a dam being broken and he's just fucking throwing his shit out there for no god damn reason.

Or maybe it's the looming knowledge that soon everything will be out in the open. That the appointment he has with the Detective in the next few days once the man is out of the hospital is going to end things for him. Because Katsuki won't lie if asked about how he caused the attack on the camp. He won't.

He should have explained things at the precinct. He hadn't been thinking. Hadn't been willing to deal with it then. There's a lot of things he should have done though and if there's one thing UA has taught him it's that he never makes the right choice.

Katsuki feels like he's on a time clock now.

Where none of this actually matters.

Yet he's still desperately clinging to it. Trying to maintain normalcy for as long as possible before the whole house crumbles down upon him.

"You're right. This isn't the best time," Todoroki agrees, one of his

medical supplies tubes comes back, whacking the Icyhot bastard in the head, causing him to grimace. “Any suggestions?”

‘Find the leader and beat them into submission in front of the rest of these hellions.’

He doesn’t say that though.

He keeps it to himself.

Shrugs.

Todoroki looks confused. And sad. The odd look on his face having been present since Katsuki lost his shit and yelled at them. All the anger and shock drained away.

“You have no ideas?” There’s a scrunch in his brows, like he can’t decipher Katsuki. “You really haven’t been yourself lately. Is it the lack of sleep? Or are you slipping again?”

Katsuki, despite his better judgement, asks.

“Slipping?”

“What your nightmares caused?” Todoroki said evenly, gesturing to Katsuki’s hands. “The way you were really out of it and confused about who I was? You did it again in the hallways, but it was... different.”

“Slipping,” Katsuki repeated more to himself, frowning down at the ground at the appropriate term. He hated it. But much to his chagrin, he really couldn’t argue it either.

A loud explosion went off.

His heart stopped beating. Katsuki’s eyes shot open and he looked towards his gauntlets, the ones he’d moved onto the stadium chairs after the little shits stole them.

They were still there.

His heart beats again.

The explosion was from the kid’s quirks.

“I’m not having kids,” Katsuki told Icyhot.

Solemnly, Todoroki nodded in agreement.

They don't pass so much as scrape by the lesson. All of them exhausted by the end of it. Katsuki hanging back and keeping his mouth shut. Present Mic had commented on his 'less than stellar performance' and how he needed to 'show some of that passion from before.' The befuddlement the man had shot him from time to time had nearly made Katsuki sneer at the man. After he'd berated him at the Sport's Festival it was annoying to have the same man act as if he wasn't doing the right thing here.

'Passion,' his ass.

Where was that attitude when he was passive aggressively attacking him via mic for an entire nation to hear. A face only a mother could love- Ha! If only he knew. Agreeing with the heroes who said he shouldn't have fought Uraraka with his all. And now here he was with a different tune. Acting like Katsuki wasn't doing exactly what everybody fucking wanted out of him.

People like that- who couldn't make up their minds about what they wanted from you, weren't trustworthy. Adults who claimed to know what was best for you who kept moving the line.

Katsuki avoided the concerned eyes of All Might as they packed up and left. Hunkering down and pulling out his homework, going over it even as the adults exchanged looks and Todoroki looked at him as if he wanted to say something but was equally distrustful of their present company.

When they get back, his stomach lining is eating itself and he shoos Todoroki away with a sneer and a half-hearted threat. The icyhot's mouth opens to say some bullshit, Katsuki's sure, to push the issue, but thankfully for fucking once Deku walks by.

The mouth clamps shut.

Icyhot looks conflicted now.

"Go do your awkward thing with Deku for a bit." Katsuki bites out. "You've exhausted the very little patience I reserve for your face."

Todoroki pauses at that, looking slightly indignant and like he wants

to say something cutting, but Deku is quickly disappearing, looking like he's planning on going to the gym and both of them know the loser will be gone for a long time when that happens. Katsuki raises his brow and Todoroki scowls at him but seems to concede the point when he rushes off like a lost puppy who's finally learned to climb the gate.

Thank Fuck Deku's always suffering some kind of emotional crisis with his sensitive bullshit and nosy ass nature. Secondhand Trauma could be the shitty nerds middle name right after broken bones over dumb fucking reasons.

Katsuki decides tonight is a Cajun Alfredo with thick red pepper kind of night. He cuts up and fries green and yellow peppers to add to his homemade sauce as it thickens, careful not to add too much flour as the rice noodles boil. He keeps his distance from the others wandering in and out, keeping his eyes on the chicken he's got frying in a light layer of oil and lemon juice. It's a good system. Besides the squad no one has really bothered him when he's cooking.

They seem to have finally come to the understanding that Katsuki doesn't initiate shit. As long as they don't talk to him then he'll keep to himself in his own personal bubble.

"That smells delicious."

Katsuki glances over his shoulder, spotting Uraraka at the edge of the kitchen with her hands behind her back as if she has to physical restrain from touching things. He ignores her.

"It does strike the senses more than usual tonight, Bakugou," Tokoyami adds from his spot at one of the kitchen bar chairs, casually flipping a book.

"I only have a little extra so if either of you want any, you'll have to fight for it," Katsuki sneered before stopping himself.

Build bridges.

He takes a breath.

"Recipes on the counter," he adds, speaking quieter, tilting his head towards his tablet. Not that he needs one, he keeps it around more for remembering what to pick up at the store than for cooking. He knows this particular recipe like the back of his hand.

“We were just complimenting you on your cooking skills,” Round cheeks tells him, a tad disapproving. “We weren’t demanding you give us your food.”

‘Then why drop the compliment in the first place?’ Katsuki wants to snap. ‘Subtext is a thing and there’s no other reason for you to speak to me.’

Pretend, the voice in his head tells him, that’s what they want. That’s what they do. They don’t want to be called out on their fake compliments. They want you to go along with it. Say thank you even if it’s not real.

Katsuki opens his mouth, but the words don’t come out.

He hates lying.

He hates that shit.

Even if sometimes he does it in the midst of panic.

Build Bridges.

Don’t cross the bridges.

Katsuki pauses as he stares at the food in front of him with a frown. There’s a baguette on the table that’s a free for all. He goes over and cuts parts of it up. Goes to the fridge and pulls out some of his back up carbs and protein he keeps ready for emergencies.

He halves his own food.

Adds the bread and emergency stock to the plate to keep everything balanced before he pulls out two more plates and divides the rest of the food into two decent sized portions with bread slices, putting them down in front of Uraraka and Tokoyami.

“I… Bakugou, you didn’t need to…” Uraraka is stuttering now. Tokoyami doesn’t seem to know what to say either, arms folded as he raises an eyebrow at him.

“We did not want to rob you of your meal, Bakugou,” Tokoyami says evenly as Katsuki has moved on to cleaning the dishes, leaving them out to dry as he picks up his own plate. “That was not our intention.”

“There’s nothing else you can gain talking to me,” Katsuki shrugs, trying to be as diplomatic as possible, trying not to bare his teeth at him like his instincts scream at him to. He puts the dishes out to dry

before turning around, going to grab his food and water jug.

They're both frowning at him now.

He internally sighed.

"Not everything is cause and effect," Tokoyami tells him. "Perhaps we simply wanted to engage with you in a positive manner."

Katsuki snorts before trying to stifle it, still its hard to fight the grin that stretches his face. Positive manner. Right. Like they don't flinch away from him or avoid him in group projects.

Build bridges. Make a good impression. He shrugs.

"Whatever you say," Katsuki muttered, taking a large bite of his food.

"You don't believe us," Uraraka said, watching him closely. Katsuki shrugged, heading towards the kitchens exit, his plate in one hand and his tablet in the other. "That's really sad, you know," Uraraka told him, raising her voice to his back.

Katsuki did roll his eyes that time, but he kept his back to them so they couldn't see it as he already felt the association trying to make him comply to the heroic image Dr. Kobayashi had in mind.

"It's always better to face reality than to delude yourself into thinking people like you." Katsuki shrugged again, maintaining a calm voice, avoiding the triggers. The dead silence in the room made a grin crack across his face. The surprise they must feel that Katsuki is self-aware enough to *know* where he stands with the class.

It doesn't matter how well the bridge is built, if neither side of the rock canyon can hold the damn thing up. There was never the option to cross it in the first place. Katsuki's leaving when he hears light footsteps following him into the living area itself...

"You know!" Uraraka said too loudly, still before continuing on at a lower volume. "You know... even if you can't trust us to like you, you trust us to have your back though, right? You know that we'll always be there for you even if you don't see us as friends?"

Katsuki paused.

That... was actually a good question.

Surprisingly the answer was obvious to him.

“If we’re in a fight against villains then yeah, I trust all of you,” Katsuki turned to look her in the eye. “But if its anyone outside of a Villain then I expect you to do what you’ve always done.”

Her eyebrow quirked.

“And what have we always done?” She asked.

Katsuki waved his hand dismissively as he turned around.

“Stand back and watch the show from a safe distance.”

No footsteps followed him this time as he left.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 24: Letters

The Associations become too much. Accidentally triggering multiple ones put Katsuki in a bad way and Kirishima and Aizawa interfere. Later that same day, Sero finds a letter in his mailbox that was not meant for him.

Letters

Chapter Summary

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The Associations become too much. Accidentally triggering multiple ones put Katsuki in a bad way and Kirishima and Aizawa interfere. Later that same day (technically) , Sero finds a letter in his mailbox that was not meant for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 24: Letters

Katsuki jerked in his sleep before shooting up from bed, sweat plastering his hair to his face. His eyes shot around the room, not recognizing where he was. He needed... he needed to get out... he needed...

Katsuki leaped out of bed, but the sheets twisted around his feet.

“Crap!” He cursed.

Acid dug into the rock beside his face. There was a foot pressing down on his chest. Horns stood above him, but she wasn’t looking at him. There was triumph on her face as she was turned to their class in the stands, cheering her on. A sense of isolation wrapped around him. Loneliness. He would never have that. His classmates would never cheer him on like that. Because Katsuki was alone.

...

He hit the floor of the arena- the bedroom, face first. There was no sunlight. But that wasn’t right. The Sport’s Festival had been during the day. Where was he? There was something grabbing his feet. He shot off an explosion, the smell of burning fabric filling the space. He tried to ground himself, tried to figure out where he was... but there was smoke now. He couldn’t feel his fingers or... or his fingers

couldn't feel the ground.

Katsuki stumbled to his feet, hitting the wall.

“Shit- ”

Tape wrapped around his ankle, flipping him onto the ground, then pinned his shoulders not even a second later. A sick feeling twisted inside of him, a feeling that he would never be good enough. stepped into his line of sight, his hand shooting forward holding his head down against the arena floor.

He was on the floor.

Up against the wall.

He was... upright?

Katsuki whirled around, knocking into... what? He was in an arena, there as nothing to knock into. Had Deku broken the ground? Had Half and Half created ice? He looked for Sero, seeking his friend out, wrapping his arms around himself as he tried to find his bearings.

Something hit the floor beside him.

Katsuki leaped, his back hitting a doorknob, jabbing into his spine. His fingers clumsily wrapped around it as he turned. He twisted it, yanking so hard that it slammed open, only to come face to face with Kirishima.

No.

No.

No.

Not again.

He didn't want these feelings anymore. He wouldn't lose. He raised his hand, palm out, glowing a dangerous red. Kirishima's eyes widened, body hardening instinctively. Katsuki let the explosion go.

The arena was rocked.

Katsuki couldn't breathe. Kirishima was hiding in the smoke of Katsuki's quirk. Where would he attack from? The space was narrow... He kept his hands up in front of him as he waited for Kirishima to

strike. A door opened. A door? Katsuki took a step back, his bare feet digging into carpet. What? Why was there... He looked down, trying to figure out what quirk this was.

Carpet and halls and doors and... and Shoji?

And Kirishima.

But he looked wrong.

He wasn't wearing their gym uniform. He was wearing, had been wearing some kind of hoodie...? It was half burned off of him, falling away from hardened skin. He had his arms in front of him defensively, not at all in the offensive manner he was so used to seeing. Katsuki kept his hand up, ready for the attack.

"Bakugou..." Kirishima spoke, his voice... was wrong. It wasn't the loud passionate war cry of the arena. Katsuki swallowed, watching him warily. "Hey, hey, it's okay, it was a nightmare... whatever happened... it was just a nightmare."

His voice was soft, soothing.

Kirishima took a step forward.

Katsuki a step back.

Shoji was entering the... the elevator.

Dorms.

Katsuki was in the dorms. It was hard to breathe. Because of the smoke? Kirishima took another step forward. And that was okay. It was okay. It was okay. It was okay. Katsuki wasn't supposed to be fighting in the dorm. He wouldn't be attacked.

No one was attacking him.

He couldn't put his hand down though. He couldn't let him get close. When Kirishima tried, he let off a few warning sparks. He needed to get his head on straight. This wasn't okay. They couldn't see him like this. He needed to get his shit together.

"It's okay," Kirishima moved his hardened hands, showing them off. Moving slowly. Katsuki sparked off again, trying to count his breaths and failing. Rock hard fingers spread out in a sign of surrender. "Can you speak? Can you talk to me, man?"

Katsuki's shoulder banged into his door frame.

He kept his hands out in warning but let himself slide down as his heart tried to pound out of his chest. Kirishima sat down with him.

"It's okay if you can't talk right now," Kirishima said, still in that soothing voice. Katsuki kept his eyes trained on him. Waiting for the bad thing to happen. It had to be coming. There had to be a strike or words or... or something. Tiny sparks continued to go off from his palms. He wouldn't get him. Katsuki wouldn't let himself be lulled into a false sense of security again.

"I haven't seen your room yet," Kirishima said conversationally, there was something in his voice that Katsuki didn't like. His eyes sliding behind Katsuki. "I mean... I did but like... it was when you did that..." Kirishima stutters a little. "After the licensing exam thing and well... I didn't exactly look around. I wasn't expecting you to have so many books. I should have, your super smart after all, but I didn't. Don't tell Iida but I like your bookshelves more. His all look like super brand new and untouchable. Yours though... you've got all these different sizes and they all look like you've read them a bunch of times. Like they're really loved."

Katsuki felt his shaking lessen, but he stayed tense, just listening.

"You have... a *lot* of LED lights. Their badass, man, way to throw off everyone's bets of your room design right out the window. The red ones along your books are super ominous," Kirishima laughed, though the sound was strained, unlike himself. "It looks like you broke your lamp though. We can make it a trip getting you a new one! We can go to the mall or something. I need new training gloves anyways, kinda tore my current ones."

He let the sparks stop, overwhelmed by exhaustion.

Sero had seen his room, Katsuki thinks blankly- the idea that he hadn't told anyone despite there apparently being a betting pool going around made something warm pool in his stomach.

"You awake now?" Kirishima whispered.

Katsuki hummed.

"Can you... tell me what happened?"

He shook his head.

A look of frustration took over Kirishima's face as his quirk released, skin softening. It wasn't tinged with the disappointment that had lined his features in the gym though. Nor the anger.

"Okay," the redhead said, but his voice had dropped the soothing tone to it and it now just sounded sad. "Is there... anything I can do?"

The elevator doors saved Katsuki from trying to answer.

Aizawa stepped out with Shoji and Katsuki wondered if it was too late in life to develop a quirk that lets the floor swallow you whole. Like that Mirio asshole.

Fresh, real humiliation sits squirming in his gut and if he weren't so tired it might eat him alive, but Katsuki drops his arm completely instead, leaning on the doorframe now more for support than in an attempt to get as far away from Kirishima as possible.

"Bakugou," Aizawa's clear voice rings down the hall as the man stops.

The voice also drew his attention to the marks on the wall, the damaged indents, the ash now beginning to form along the ceiling. Kirishima's hoodie wasn't salvageable. His breathing was shaky, but not ragged. He found himself swallowing against his dry, parched throat, wondering if he'd been screaming in his sleep.

'Why can't I stop fucking up?'

"You normally make tea for yourself after one of these, right?" Aizawa asks, crouching down in front of him.

'What?'

He hadn't known Aizawa knew about these.

Beside him, Katsuki sees Kirishima's eyes go impossibly wide. He doesn't want to know what his friend is thinking. Doesn't want to think. He crosses his arms and nods. The man looks passed him to see the lamp and tattered bedsheets. But he doesn't comment on it.

"Can you stand?"

Katsuki clings to the frame and uses it to haul himself to his feet.

Aizawa turns to the other two in the hall with them.

"Would you like to join us for tea?" Aizawa asks, as if it's not in the

middle of the night on a school night.

“Uh,” Kirishima exchanges a look with Shoji who shrugs. “Sure?”

At least Katsuki isn't the only one weirded out by how casual Aizawa is being. Katsuki keeps his distance as he follows them onto the elevator, gluing himself to the opposite side as much as possible. The three seem content to squish themselves in the corner, bewildering Katsuki further.

Others are up.

His explosions must have woken them.

Todoroki whose room is directly above him.

Iida whose directly below.

Jiro whose quirk must make it hard to sleep in a dorm full of teenagers.

They're whispering at the table when they walk in and Katsuki has to wonder if it was really Shoji who got Aizawa or if one of these fuckers got there first. They quiet and Katsuki knows then that he'd been the topic. Not that he'd had much doubt before.

Somehow, he's too tired to care though.

He slumps into a seat, feeling their eyes on him as Aizawa Sensei pulls down tea and starts to boil water.

“I can make hot cocoa too for anyone who wants that instead,” the man offers. Jirou and Kirishima vouch for the hot cocoa. Katsuki stays quiet, his hands fiddling with a napkin in the awkward silence.

Aizawa has his back turned to them as he works.

“I never had trouble sleeping until my third year in UA,” Aizawa told them, pulling down mini marshmallows and dark chocolate, spooning it carefully into two cups. “My friends and I crafted this elaborate plan to open up an agency together. Two of us would work during the day and I would work at night. We had a city picked out that only had a few heroes and not nearly enough to safely cover it. None of us liked paperwork but we figured we could figure it out between us.”

Aizawa popped open some green tea, measuring out the leaves carefully before putting them in metal strainers.

“And then in my third year, one of us died.”

Katsuki felt himself stiffen. He felt more than saw his classmates fidgeting around them, glancing at one another.

“Our plans no longer existed,” Aizawa said softly. “It was inconceivable to consider the concept that we would still open up an agency. I went Underground after graduation even though Mic tried to convince me we could still be a Hero-duo with just the two of us. I spent five years taking on solo missions, I didn’t sleep once through the night in those years. I did well. In name, at least, hit the top 100 and stayed there for a long time.”

Aizawa began warming the milk.

The man set the honey pot and sugar bowl in the middle of the table.

“Mic would stop by a lot. Try to drag me out of my hole. Bring food and chit chat and for awhile that’s how I lived. Doing missions, hanging out with Mic, sometimes Midnight when she’d stop by. Otherwise I didn’t interact with people. I’d become completely disillusioned with the idea that I could have a good life. I just thought... if I could keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep doing just one more job... there were no other thoughts really. The goal wasn’t to reach anything- not top hero or to make people’s lives better, not to stop bad guys, or prove anything to anyone. No, the only thing going through my head during that time was that I couldn’t *not* be a hero. Not after all the work I’d put in. Not after my friend had died and I hadn’t. Then what was it for?”

Aizawa poured the hot milk into two cups, took the boiling water off of the kettle the moment it began to whistle, careful as he poured them into the remaining mugs he’d pulled down from the cabinets.

“For five years?” Kirishima’s voice was gruff, sad. As if he couldn’t imagine such a long period of time just trying to survive.

Aizawa nodded, placing each drink carefully on the table in front of them. Katsuki could smell mint rising with the steam.

“What got you out of it?” Jirou asked, she was fiddling with the ends of her ears. The Jax clinking together in the otherwise quiet kitchen as Aizawa continued to prepare the drinks almost absentmindedly.

“There was a halfway house for Foster care kids waiting for a family to take them in. It was in a small town, not many heroes in the city

itself.”

Aizawa paused, looking hesitant, but his eyes landed on Katsuki. He met the tired, strained eyes of his teacher head on.

“It was burned to the ground with six kids and two workers inside,” Aizawa breathed. “The building was right next to the one we wanted to open up our agency in. For weeks I was wracked with guilt... if I’d listened to Mic. If we’d opened up the agency...”

“Sensei,” Todoroki’s voice cut in. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Aizawa shrugged as he sat down with them.

“Perhaps not. That didn’t matter then though. Back then there was nothing in the world that could convince me that my decisions had led to no hero helping out against the fire. I’d already had myself wrapped in so much guilt over other things that I had no control over. Survivor’s guilt, it’s called,” Katsuki felt his teacher’s eyes fall on him. “Sometimes when we are involved in terrible things and we make it out, and others don’t, it feels as if we didn’t deserve that stroke of luck... or that if we’d just been paying more attention during battle, we might have been able to pull off a miracle to stop the others from suffering... from dying.”

His hands were shaking again.

Katsuki picked up his tea, sipping at it, appreciative of the soothing way it slid down his raw throat.

“So what did you do about it?” Iida questioned.

“I left the big city then, there were plenty of heroes in it by that point, and moved to the small town.” Aizawa told them. “I felt... more awake than before. More aware. I started paying more attention to the small squabbles, the little things going on in the town I could help with. It became a hobby to stroll through the streets and listen to the people around me. I took in the odd stray cat here and there. I forced myself to learn how to cook properly rather than waiting for Mic to show up with meals. As it turns out... developing hobbies to invest in outside of work is one of many ways to heal, though I wasn’t aware of that back then. I was just trying to do better by my friend’s memory and not allow something like the fire to happen again.”

“You still have trouble sleeping though, even now?” Kirishima stated more than asked. None of them needed the answer to that. Katsuki

figured they were waiting for something else to slip out if it was said out loud.

“UA teaches you how to be a hero, not how to handle the aftermath,” Aizawa said slowly. “Though it wasn’t until I started teaching here that I recognized that. I’m not exactly a mental health professional, though I have been researching it extensively with Hound Dog since the USJ. I want you all to have better coping mechanisms than I did and that I have.”

“That’s commendable of you, sir,” Iida spoke, too loud for the quiet of the hour. Katsuki felt more at ease now that the attention had been pulled away from him. Aizawa’s honesty had also made him feel a little less like an absolute failure. Four Eyes got a look on his face that made him look constipated or as if he’d taken a bite of Aoyama’s cooking and was trying his damndest to pretend it was tasty. “My... the attack on my older brother by Stain during the Sports Festival affected me poorly. I... it’s not the same, obviously, as my brother survived- ”

“Don’t compare the events in your life on a scale with other’s experiences,” Aizawa cut in. “Suffering can’t be measured in less or more. It simply is. The end of your brother’s career as a hero, the pain he felt and your own suffering, by extension, were terrible things. Each event or experience is entirely unique and each person who has those events and experiences sees and reacts differently to them.”

Iida wavered in his seat.

Katsuki had completely forgotten about his classmate’s brother.

“Thank you, Sensei,” Iida said softly before his voice became stronger. “I just wanted to say that I would be more than willing to try any of your suggestions or anything you would like to incorporate into our regular curriculum.”

“Me too!” Kirishima spoke up, with far too much enthusiasm.

As the others around the table added their own willingness to the batch, Katsuki suddenly felt as if he’d fallen into a cleverly laid trap geared specifically at him and his own unwillingness in the matter.

He felt Kirishima’s eyes on him.

‘Fuck me.’

Aizawa nodded.

“I’ll be opening up the morning before class for it. It won’t be mandatory, and it will be experimental, but I’m willing to drag myself out of bed for anyone that wants to be there at 7:25 instead of 8:25.”

‘You bastards.’

Katsuki always came to class earlier than most. At least, before his sleeping had been disrupted and he’d been spending more time trying to catch a few more minutes of sleep to function.

“Well try some exercises and see how it goes from there,” Aizawa continued casually, as if he wasn’t creating group therapy sessions at the drop of a hat. Like it wasn’t going to look suspicious as fuck if Katsuki didn’t show up. The lunatic who runs into the common room each night to make tea. Who does homework at midnight in the common room because he can’t sleep through a whole night. Who failed the Provisional license Exam because he doesn’t know how to smile or play nice.

“My living quarters are on the Ground floor, so I’ll be leaving my door open while I’m awake if anyone needs to talk, but don’t be afraid to knock if it’s closed either. Bakugou...”

Katsuki stiffened.

“...there’s extra bedsheets in the laundry room on the top shelf.”

Katsuki nodded, resigned.

They spoke for a little longer. Finishing their teas and cocoas as they exchange ideas for the early morning meetings. Aizawa listened to the group, accepting and rejected thoughts as they came.

He didn’t offer any suggestions himself.

Obviously.

It became harder and harder to keep his eyes open though and Katsuki realized that he should have headed up sooner. He leaned against the table, listening half-heartedly on his folded arms.

He should...

How had Shota's life gotten so complicated so quickly?

There's a little girl in a hospital bed with nowhere to go and no one to trust in a world that would snatch her up to use for their own gain as soon as they got the opportunity. He hears it in the voices of the heroes who 'offer' to take her in. In the way the Hero Public Safety Commission suggests not so subtly that they could put her in their program for those who have potential and in the way politician's eyes glitter as they try to move things to benefit them best.

It's why he steps forward, hands in his pockets, eyes dead as he stares them all down and proclaims that he will be taking over guardianship of the little one as his quirk is the only means of protection if she loses control.

It's a testament to the bodies in Eri's wake that no one argues.

It's a testament to Shota's reputation that no passive aggressive political moves are made in the next twenty-four hours as the paperwork makes its way through the rank.

Eri remains at the hospital as Shota stumbles back into his normal life dead on his feet and still healing, encountering with staggering shock the reality he left behind for the mission. A student whose mother Shota arrested less than a week ago avidly avoiding looking at him and walking around as if he's been given a death sentence.

In the infamous words of his student...

Motherfucking flaming shit balls.

Mitsuki Bakugou had been bailed out by the husband the day after the incident. An awful outcome to a series of awful revelations. His heart had nearly stopped when Nezu told him they were trying to get evidence of child abuse on Mitsuki and to make sure Katsuki stayed within his eyesight only for Katsuki Bakugou to be missing from the dorms when he returned.

He'd watched the security camera footage with earbuds in as he and his students headed towards the Overhaul takedown briefing. It had been... disturbing, to say the least. And damning. Irreparably damning.

As far as Shota was concerned, Katsuki would not be returning to the Bakugou household. The whole conversation between mother and son had reeked of long-term emotional abuse and manipulation.

The way she'd immediately gone after him for not being in class despite the kid looking ready to kill over had made watching the rest of it hard to take. It explained *why* the kid had shown up to class in the first place if that was the type of attitude, he'd grown up around.

There were parts of the conversation he didn't understand. Mitsuki, for one, had implied that Katsuki somehow knew the attack on the camp was going to take place and with the way the kid had swayed and paled, looking as if he was going to puke... well, it made Shota worry.

Shota didn't believe for a second that Katsuki actually knew about the attack about to take place. The kid was obstinate but not careless. He hadn't known they would come to the camp. The fact that his mother would try to pin that on him was downright horrifying. The fact that Katsuki seemed to believe her was devastating and it meant no one had done enough to watch out for the kid after Kamino.

It also meant that there was something they missed about that mess.

They'd assumed that the camp was the first place Katsuki had been targeted, but after listening to that tape on replay over and over again, Shota knows that assessment was wrong and now has a much better idea of what the detective coming to meet them this week wants to speak on.

What strikes him most is that Shota checked on the kid, but he never asked Katsuki about the kidnapping. Thought he knew everything important about it already. Thought the only variable was how the kid was doing.

More than that though...

Mitsuki had made it sound as if the detective was *coming after Katsuki* rather than *for him*. It was unnerving how the woman took a situation and twisted it beyond recognition. Keeping all the parts there but changing the fundamental principles of it.

Suddenly the fact that Katsuki seemed to see everything in the worst possible lighting made more sense. The near paranoid way he kept his classmates at a distance with the expectation that interaction wouldn't be good.

"No. I know..." The kid's voice cracked. *"I know it was my fault! I'm not... the detective is coming to talk to me about... about the text messages."*

He looked over at his student, who looked small between Iida's wider, taller frame and Kirishima's broad muscled one, half destroyed hoodie on the redhead worn without a care. Bakugou looked worn to the bone and had been frighteningly quiet. Not a word said since he'd woken up.

Kirishima shook Bakugou gently, but the blonde didn't stir.

"He's *out* out," Kirishima whispered.

Shota sighed.

He was pretty sure even Jirou wouldn't be able to wake the blonde. There was no need to whisper. It also meant Shota wouldn't be able to talk to the kid privately like he planned.

"I'll handle it."

"Will he be okay?" Jirou asked.

It struck him how tiny she was among the boys. Swamped in an oversized hoodie and sweats, she looked nothing like the goth, confident hero in training that thrived in his classroom. It was hard to tell her that he didn't know. That they had to take it one day at a time and it required Bakugou being willing to accept help, not just them offering it.

"It depends," he said carefully. "But we're going to try to give him the best environment to be okay."

A noise drew his attention.

"I don't know what to do," Kirishima said brokenly, startling Shota. "He won't *talk* to me. It's like pulling teeth to get him to talk about even the smallest of things." He was staring at Bakugou's sleeping form like a kicked puppy. Shota wondered if Hizashi had felt the frustration back then, trying to reach Shota at his darkest moments. He also immediately decided that he didn't want to know but that he probably should know. That it would be *healthy* to have that conversation with his best friend and with dawning aggravation he realized it would be best to not be a hypocrite towards his kids and take care of that now rather than later.

"He's stubborn, that's for sure," Shota said, rather than admit his thoughts, "...but you ARE a good friend to him, Kirishima. There's no one here that doubts how good of an influence you've been to

Bakugou.”

“It’s not enough,” Kirishima muttered. “I don’t even know what the problem is! I can’t figure out what he’s thinking...”

Shota can’t help but sympathize.

He wonders if Bakugou had listened to him. If somewhere in his dorm room there was a notebook he’d been writing in. Or if he’d tried one of his other suggestions. Its driving him crazy not to ask. Not to push.

He wants to throw Bakugou into therapy and lock the door behind him.

He wants to interrogate Bakugou, ask him how he’s feeling. Ask him how he’s handling things. Try to get a handle on what he needs from Shota. What he can provide to make this all just a little bit better on the kid.

Bakugou’s withdrawal from all human interaction since they’d moved into the dorms has him worried sick. In a completely different way than Midoriya’s self-sacrificing broken bone disasters and the implication of *that* for the kid’s mental health. In a different way than the tense meeting with Kaminari and his father during the discussion of opening the dorms. In a different way than the empty home of Yaoyorozu and the brief Hologram agreement of their daughter moving in. In a different way than Todoroki’s insistence of using his sister’s name as his emergency contact rather than his father.

Already more fond of this class than the ones before through sheer shared trauma of the USJ and Camping incidents, the dorms had pushed Shota over the edge. Living with these kids on a more permanent basis had destroyed any semblance of distance that existed.

These were his *kids*.

Shota knew with equal measures of dread and fondness that after this class graduated in a few years’ time that it wouldn’t be the normal end. It wouldn’t be a Pro hero calling him Sensei after graduation on the streets like normal. It wouldn’t be a casual ‘how have you been?’

He would be checking in on them on purpose rather than a happy coincidence.

And they would no doubt be checking in on him.

Shota pushed away from the table, gathering the mugs and bringing them over to the sink. They didn't need some positive bullshit. And they'd never expect it from him.

"Kirishima," Aizawa said sternly as he turned around. "Do you think getting over trauma is a simple thing?"

"I..." Kirishima straightened. "Of course not."

"Do you think building up mental health and healthy coping mechanism is easy?" He demanded.

"I never said that."

"It's been eleven weeks since Kamino," Shota said softly. "Seven weeks since we moved into the dorms. Stop expecting yourself to be able to know instinctively how to handle trauma and what the right thing to do is. I still don't know what I'm doing and I've been a Pro-Hero for sixteen years now. A teacher for five. I don't know how to help Bakugou, but I'm figuring it out. You're right, he's not doing well, and that sucks. It sucks to see him struggling and refusing to reach out to you."

Shota leaned forward, making sure to look Kirishima in his eyes.

"But you're doing a fantastic job of being his friend and as long as you continue being there for him, then you are doing exactly what you need to be doing. Do you understand me?"

"I..." Kirishima's lip wobbled and for a moment Shota thought he'd end up with another sobbing student on his hands, but then it straightened out. "YeES! I mean yes! I will!"

"Good. And I want you to be at the morning sessions too. Not just in support of Bakugou if we can get him there. But for yourself." Shota's eyes wandered to everyone in the room. Shoji and Iida and Jirou standing off to the side, looking unsure. "I want all of you to be there. You don't have to be," he reminded them. "But I think it would do all of you good."

He gestured towards the elevator.

"Try to get a few more hours of sleep before classes start."

They trudged out of the room, leaving Shota with Bakugou, still dead to the world.

Poor kid.

Shota walked over to him, gently putting one hand on his back, one under his knees. Even in his sleep, Bakugou was stiff as a board, as if he refused to let his guard down even in this vulnerable state. He lifted the kid up, adjusting his hold so that the head that lolled over Shota's arm was tucked against his chest.

He really was out cold. Not even a twitch.

The long sleeves the kid was wearing pushed up a bit with the adjustment and Shota blinked at the letters drawn in black sharpie over what looked like a rash.

'Odd.'

Did the sharpie cause the rash? Or had Bakugou drawn over the rash? He'd have to ask the kid himself later. If it was an allergy, they needed to add it to his medical list. The **Q, BB and DC** seemed harmless enough though. He knows heroes who have tattooed certain sayings on their wrists or palms to remind them of good things in dark times. Hizashi had texted him about updating the kids medical records himself not even a day ago so it made sense. Maybe the other had already talked with the kid about it. The ink looked fresh though-liked he'd drawn it on before bed.

Out of habit, probably.

The kid was a creature of habits. Both good and bad.

He carried Bakugou over to the couch, laying him down before going in search of a pillow and blanket to tuck the teenager in.

An idea was forming in his head. An idea that might not be the best solution but... one that might just work out for the best for everyone involved. He'd just have to be careful. With both of them.

With a tired, hesitant sigh, Shota turned off the lights.

Morning had come fast. Hanta felt as if he were half asleep as he saw

the name on the phone. Hanta worried his lip as he took the phone call. He waved to Kirishima and Kaminari casually as he slid out of the living room, listening to the other end. Bakugou walked past him, earbuds in and running shoes on for his morning jog. More than one person looked like they wanted to throw Bakugou over their shoulder and tie him down into the closest bed. Kirishima looked torn, fingers tapping anxiously on his mug but for once the redhead didn't try to talk Bakugou out of it.

The voice on the other side of his phone distracted him from such thoughts.

“...don't know. I might have to move in with Gress again.”

“That's a shit idea,” Hanta said quietly, winking at Tsu whose eyes glanced in his direction. She smiled softly at him before looking back down at her textbook, her back leaning against Ashido's own as they talked about Cementoss's modern literature homework.

“What do you want from me? I'm already working two jobs and between them I can't pay rent.”

“So the better alternative is to move in with someone who eats your food and you starve?” Hanta snapped back. “There's a reason you got a place by yourself in the first place. I'm not saying I have a solution for you, but don't take a step back instead of going forward.”

“A split rent would make's things easier though,” she sighed into the phone. “I've tried to find a cheaper place, but I can't go much further from where work is.”

Hanta closed the door behind him as he moved onto the walking path outside. It was getting dark out and curfew would be sooner rather than later.

“I know you studied for this job and stuff,” Hanta said into the phone, “I know it's the job you need in order to get the job you want, but...”

“I've considered other jobs too, Hun, I really have, but getting the time off to go job hunting under my jobs nose isn't really easy. I can't afford to quit this one without having another lined up.”

Hanta hesitated.

“Aunt Wynn could take you in.”

There was silence on the other line.

He knows how much she hates that option. Aunt Wynn was old and barely scraping by out in the country. It's not like his sister hasn't already done that. She spent three years out in the country, her career stagnant in a place where nothing happened and where work wasn't really available. Where retirement money was stretched thin even for their Aunt and even though it was easier on the woman to have a younger body there to take care of all the necessary upkeep of a house and home, the money that went into basic necessities always stretched to the breaking point.

"I could," she agrees neutrally.

It's unspoken that his sister would have to be kicked out of her apartment and put on the streets before the option became a real option.

"I'll figure something out," she adds. "There's a meat bun shop down the street, I was talking to the shop owner and on my way back from work he offered to let me wash dishes in the back in exchange for a hot meal. That means I wouldn't have to go grocery shopping for a bit if I do that."

"Nabi," Hanta sighs.

It's not good enough.

He looks at the dorm building, leans against one of the light poles outside as he tries to think.

"Tell me how you're doing though," Nabi brushes off her tight situation with the ease of years of practice. "We always talk about my stuff. It's boring. Tell me how your classes are going."

"Good." Hanta tells her carefully.

She's been nervous about him talking UA stuff since the camp. She'd tried to convince their grandparents to ban him from going back to the school. Tried to convince them to send him somewhere else.

"There's a Hero school only a few blocks from me," she'd insisted. 'I can keep him safe. I know he earned his way into the school. I get it! I'm proud, but... these people, they clearly don't care about his safety! About him! Who cares if it's a top school if he gets hurt every other week because they aren't protecting him properly?'"

It had taken nearly the entire month they'd been given off after Kamino to convince her that this was what he wanted and where he wanted to be. Aizawa and All Might hadn't talked to her, they'd talked to his grandparents and at the end of the day they did hold the decision in their hands, but his sister...

She was the one he wanted approval from.

His grandparents were great, really, he loved them dearly, but they were... not very responsive. They had a routine, and they'd listen, sure, but they rarely reacted. They lacked to have their breakfast on the patio, watch the tele until noon, then go for a walk around their neighborhood where they had the same conversation with their neighbors that they did every day.

They tried to be involved in his life, but the honest truth was that new things exhausted them. They weren't even just regular old they were old, old. They'd had Hanta's dad very late in life and Hanta's parents had him in their late thirties themselves. Most of the time it had been Hanta picking up after them.

Now it was Nabi.

Which he hated but she always reassured him that it was no big deal. She was close enough and it never took long to make sure things were good which was an outright lie. Gran was always leaving the dishes to pile up because she'd go to do something and forget about them completely. Grandpa had been knocking things over more and more lately, having trouble with his motor skills. Both weren't able to bend down well and if they got on the ground for any reason, they weren't getting back up.

Hanta had felt guilty about that.

His grandpa had threatened to kick him out if he refused to move into the dorms though (and he'd made sure to tell Aizawa that when his teacher came to visit).

"We might not be able to give you the attention you deserve, honey bun, but we'll be damned if we stand in your way," his grandmother had told him the night before he left, hands shaking from arthritis, but a smile that was steady and true. *"We won't be here for much longer so you have yourself a good cry, but don't you dare let it slow you down. Just make sure you say a good, goodbye to us each time you visit so you live with no regrets, huh, love? We're ready even though I know you aren't."*

"She's ready, but I'm not!" His grandfather had screamed from the other room. *"I still need to beat Bisk before I croak!"*

"Just good?" His sister drawled on the other line, dislodging his bittersweet thoughts. "I give you a play by play of my drama as a starving artist trying to make ends meet while garnering attempts to get my building designs in for more than a barely paid internship and you, the Pro-Hero trainee, come back at me with a 'good'?"

Hanta chuckled, his feet taking him around the dorms again and down a path he was only half paying attention to.

"Sorry. I've just been busy. We started our second internship two weeks ago and we've all been run ragged by it. Kaminari fell asleep in his cereal the other day," Hanta snorted, running his hand through his hair. "I'm learning a ton from this group of rescue heroes, actually, they've been teaching me fire rescue since its sort of my weak spot."

"Since fire can melt our tape, yeah," she said thoughtfully.

"Right, so if I use my tape to propel me up and there's too much heat, then it melts," Hanta said, feeling self-conscious in admitting that. "So, I'm kind of useless in that if I rely on my quirk."

"Did they teach you a way around that?"

"We went over maneuvers where I can swing into a building from a distance and we focused on my ability to create safety nets down below so that people could jump safely and my ability to catch them mid-air."

"Do you have to go into the buildings? If your quirk isn't qualified for that kind of work, it seems wrong to have you go in," Nabi said probingly. She was trying to be casual but the concern was practically dripping out of her voice.

"That's why I'm doing this training," Hanta said instead of directly answering her. "So that no matter what the situation is, I can still save people."

He can't bring himself to tell her that he'd go in without a second's thought. That he had done plenty of exercises just within the USJ for that sort of thing. Though his issues weren't nearly as terrifying as Bakugou's. A guy who sweats explosives walking into a burning building was on a whole 'nother level of difficulty. Though Bakuogu in typical Bakugou fashion treated those exercises as if they were an

absolute breeze. ‘Oh, lookie here, is that a fire? Bitch please. I’m Katsuki Bakugou. I can make those flames shrink just from glaring them into submission. Cause my skin to explode? Nah. That’s amateur stuff. Of course, I have the control to ensure I don’t perspire while surrounded by heat and flames that could blow my limbs off.’

“What other stuff have they taught you?” Nabi asks quietly. Her voice is still filled with concern but there’s fondness there now. Pride.

He smiles into his phone and tells her all about the extensive mission they undertook over the weekend. He tells her about coming back to the dorms and having Kaminari and Ashido cover every inch of his space with yellow and pink glitter. Every time he opens something else, more falls out and blankets his shit over again.

He grabs his mail while he’s out. Snags a soda from the vending machine.

“I should let you go so you can get some rest for tomorrow,” Nabi tells him as Hanta hums and opens a letter from one of his internship offers. It’s a bit late, but he can look into it for next semester. Always good to build a reputation with fellow heroes.

“Love you, talk to you soon?” Hanta says as he opens the next one.

“So soon you’ll be annoyed,” she promised before the line goes dead.

His lips quirk as he pockets his phone and opens the next letter, fingers flipping the paper and eyes beginning to skim...

I’m reaching out to you because I believe I can help you.

Hanta raised his eyebrows at that. A little amused and a lot weirded out.

It is obvious you have special needs. Your villainous reputation proceeds you and not in a good way. Things will be very difficult for you moving forward in your career as a hero. It has come to my attention that many Hero Agencies have even gone to the trouble of informing you that you will not be welcome at their agency.

Most of these Pro-Heroes see you as a Monster.

Quite frankly, I don't disagree with them. You've created quite the mess of things and it will be immeasurably difficult to turn your image around. I have 10+ years of experience with difficult cases, though none as harrowing as yours. I'm still willing to take up the task and I believe I have the connection, influence, and experience to curb the negative media. With time I can turn it around all together.

Of course, such services would be a bit steep considering the hit to my own credibility and the work involved, the compensation for it would be twice the amount you might put forward towards a normal Media Representative, however, no normal MR would touch your case with a ten foot pole.

Allow me to help you and I promise to work towards a time when you will be seen as a Hero rather than the Villain everyone has painted you as. It's not too late. We can still turn this around. You don't have to be a monster.

Contact: TheRightWords@gmail.com

Furan Zon

Hanta stood there for a long time, staring at the words. There was no way this letter was meant for him. None of it sounded even remotely close... Suspicion sat heavy in his stomach, and he turned the letter over to the front. To: Katsuki Bakugou.

How could someone...?

Why would they...?

Hanta read the letter again. *Most of the Pro-Heroes see you as a Monster.* What the actual fuck... Who says that to anyone? Who thinks that? Why...? Hanta swallowed. *It has come to my attention that many Hero Agencies have even gone to the trouble of informing you that you will not be welcome at their agency.*

Pro-Heroes had done that? Pro-Heroes had... holy shit. They'd sent letters like that to Bakugou? How long had this been going on?

The tickling of a memory comes back to him. The students in the hallways that had been whispering about Bakugou when they'd first started living in the Dorm systems.

"I can't believe they allowed that monster back into the school."

"We wouldn't have to live on campus if it wasn't for him."

The look on Bakugou's face. That weird vacant look as he'd dragged Hanta away and told him to 'drop it.' He should have pushed more. He feels shaken as he imagines Bakugou opening up this letter-reading this letter.

The vacant look that they'd seen on his face more and more often lately.

And the letters from the Pros...

Shit man.

There wasn't a lot of people out there Bakugou respected, but Pro-heroes? Bakugou always respected them [in his own way]. To get letters like that- Hanta knows his friend and he knows that would affect him big time.

He found himself heading back to the dorms at a jog, looking around for the teacher who would be unwillingly pulling himself out of his bed at this point. He knocked too loudly. Drawing the attention of his classmates who stared at him curiously over tea cups and bowls of cereal.

The door opened.

Aizawa stared at him balefully before taking note of his face. The door swung wide open and a head tilt ushered him inside the office slash living quarters of his teacher. The man gestured to a couch as he took a much loved, comfy looking office chair, coffee cups and papers covering every inch of the desk.

"What's going on?" Aizawa demanded.

"I didn't know it was Bakugou's mail," Hanta starts, fidgeting with the edge of the paper in his hands.

Immediately Aizawa slumps and there's a dark look on his face.

"Explain."

Hanta takes a breath and hands the man the letter.

Eyes begin to burn red as they read.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 25: The Boiling Frog

Toga and Magne make their move.

The Boiling Frog

Chapter Summary

Toga and Magne Make their move

Nezu just wants things to stop happening to his high school, is that so much to ask?

Bakugou's PTSD catches up to everyone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 25: The Boiling Frog

The sun was rising above the horizon, a breeze hinting at the start of fall as it found each nook to crawl along a person's skin. Toga pays this no mind, humming to herself in pleased satisfaction as the smell of copper is licked up almost lovingly from a face that is so wrinkled that some blood is left behind in the folds.

She pulls back and smiles at the gagged man, finally putting some distance between them and then... she feels a tad lonely, if she's being honest. She's been on this job for a few days now and more often than not she spends her time observing never being able to talk to anyone.

She shouldn't.

But it's not like anyone will hear.

She made sure.

Toga pulls the tape from his mouth. Gently pulls the gag out. The old man tied to his computer chair glares back at her weakly. She smiles with his face fixed in place, the old leathery skin moving stiffly against her own cheeks. An odd sensation but one she's not altogether unfamiliar with

She'd taken enough blood that she could wear this form for quite some time though not enough to send the man into hypovolemic shock. Big Sis had been very adamant that no one dies during this. It was meant to be a show of hand to Katsuki Bakugou.

Not for her to have fun.

Which was *fine* even if the old man looked as if he was on his last legs anyway. She'd watched him from afar for a bit, the hobbling so slow that it was painful to watch and would be even more painful to imitate. Honestly, she was sure Katsuki would agree that such a slow, dismal human wasn't really needed anymore. She'd been sad indeed when the others wouldn't let her be alone with him in the room. There was something entirely unsatisfying with seeing Katsuki Bakugou bleed. Unlike Izuku, her fellow blonde preened under the exhilaration of danger. He reveled in his blood flowing.

For once she had no interest in seeing someone bleed.

The old man though... every wince and pained expression was music to her ears.

But Big Sis was all Blah. Blah. Blah. Offering a safe place for Katsuki. Blah. Blah. Blah. As if Katsuki Bakugou cared about safe. She'd been insistent about it though so Toga wouldn't argue with her.

Toga had watched the video herself, of course, and there's been something... enticing about seeing Katsuki cry. She *liked* it. In a different way than she liked seeing people bleed. While the other blonde wasn't that interesting when he bled, not like her Izuku at any rate, when he cried... that was something else. Pain wracked his whole frame. Like he'd been holding everything in for years and was finally bursting with it.

It was beautiful.

She liked it when people were vulnerable and laid bare for the world. They were always so much more honest when they were hurt and bleeding all over the place. Something dire and desperate that brought out people's true feelings.

Blood didn't speak that way with Katsuki though.

Alone in that alley... that had been the version she wanted to see again.

"What will you... do?" The old man rasped.

Toga grinned, the wrinkles stretching unnaturally.

"I'm going to say hello to Kacchan, obviously," she winked at him.

“We’re going to teach the school a lesson, forcefully. Shigaraki still thinks we can get Kacchan on our side, you know? I’ve talked to Katsuki before and told him we were still watching him, you know. And he looked dreadful... all dead eyed and tired and sickly. Even his puffy hair looked sad.”

“Haven’t you people hurt the boy enough?!” Sakane demanded, the rope tied around the wrists broke the delicate old skin, blood dripping onto the floor and causing dark bruises for form. She licked her lips at the sight. “Don’t you think that what you did to him might have something to do with how he’s handling things now?”

“Careful,” she cooed. “We wouldn’t want you accidentally killing yourself. Not after I showed such restraint! I don’t want Big Sis Magne to be upset with me.”

She re-gagged him.

“And we’ve never wanted to hurt him, you know.” She patted the man’s cheek. “We want to help him. We’re going to take him away from all the mean people who have been trying to make him something he’s not. It’s them who have been monsters.” Her hold on his shoulders tightened a bit in her anger, but she hardly noticed. “It’s the school and society who want to tear him apart. We want him as he is.”

She took a deep breath before letting all the anger drain out of her.

She was not Toga right now.

She was Sakane.

She gave him a two fingered salute, before picking up the bouquet of flowers Magne had made. What better way to remind him they care than a special present from the ones that have been there for him since the beginning.

It was mightily concerning, Nezu decided as he stared down at the disk in his hand, what the shopkeeper had just told him. More concerning what Nezu had witnessed in the body language.

“Have you successfully escorted our guest off the premises?” Nezu said casually into his walkie-talkie.

“Confirmed,” Ectoplasm’s voice echoed out.

“Good.”

He already regretted allowing the man on campus for the limited time he'd been here. Every nerve in his body and quirk telling him the man was off. He took his paw off the receiving button, deciding against putting the disk in the school's system to play. This was the type of piece best done on his personal device. One disconnected from any electrical connection. Not that he was particularly concerned about the shop keeper, but Nezu hadn't survived this long among the humans by being careless.

Better to be safe than sorry if this was meant for the intentions of hacking.

Despite the old flesh and innocent background, the man who had just left his door had been pretending to hobble. Fairly well, Nezu will allow, but not well enough to fool Nezu's quirk. There had been a lightness to the steps. A deception. As if the body could and would move with much greater dexterity and energy than it was pretending to show him.

Still...

The words spoken had felt sincere to him.

High Specs intelligence did nothing to tell him what the humans walking through his door wanted or thought, but it helped to see through people's tactics or plans. Analyzing movements and positions to better see the next step. The point had been to deliver the disk and the flowers, Nezu was certain.

Nezu had made sure those flowers were looked over by a quirk specialist before it left his office.

Nothing was wrong with them.

No quirk usage.

No hidden devices.

Just flowers.

He eyed them uneasily but couldn't deny the simple request without evidence of foul play or even bad intentions.

“It's an odd choice to give a teenager,” Nezu had noted to Sakene.

The old man had smiled, shrugging.

“The idea was not mine,” Sakene admitted as if confessing. “My wife insisted. Said flowers cheer everyone up and they are a demonstration that you care. Who am I to argue with the wiser sex? I’m just a silly old man.”

Silly old man indeed.

One who had gone far out of his way to give him information on his student being harassed in public. A truth he’d already known from Detective Naomasa’s kindly intervention and one that Nezu had been mulling over for a few weeks on how best to act. He’d even... much to his chagrin, reached out to the Bakugou’s about what they’d wanted done about the Social Media issues and the deeper underlying problems.

Before the Mistuki Bakugou incident that is. Now his own actions felt cringe worthy. Foresight was, as always, a bitch.

It was a struggle to not sigh dramatically at what a nuisance this mess was becoming. Parents harming their offspring was, unfortunately, more common than he liked to think upon. High achieving students, like the ones who made it into UA, were often pushed there by family members intent on forcing them to succeed and do well- even at the detriment to the child themselves.

As one of the best first years, winner of the Sport’s Festival, first in the Entrance Exam, highly trained despite a Fashion Industry background- Nezu was not surprised by the new information being fed their way. High Functioning in academics and sports but with a bad attitude and difficulty dealing with others pointed towards heavy isolation and a need for perfection.

In the same manner Yaoyorozu’s rich upbringing and high intelligence had led to a realization that she had no practical experience which had led to a hit to her self-esteem. Easily rectified over time. Aizawa’s special brand of teaching a perfect means of improving upon it. Experience and practice were what the man pushed the most. Another reason he’d pushed to have the girl go up against him during her exams.

In the manner that Iida- one who suffered from an unbendable high moral ground who thought himself morally superior to others and thus allowed those feelings to be warped and manipulated when faced with a serial killer Stain, a man who felt morally superior himself and

had taken upon himself to be judge, jury and executioner. Such an encounter could have gone so much worse for the boy and if his friends had not arrived, taken into the account the unlikely event he would have survived, Nezu doubts the boy would have realized his own moral inadequacy and would most likely have gone on believing himself righteous in the event. That would not have ended well. He was pleased to know Iida had taken his second internship with lower ranked heroes, learning from them and humbling himself. It was a great show of maturity and growth for him.

He'd honestly believed- looking at the profiles of all the first-year heroics students that Todoroki would have caused the most issues. Nezu had been the one to oversee the recommendation students entrance exam and the single minded, dead eyed stare had set off enough alarm bells that Nezu had created a profile and warning to the teachers to watch him for any red flags before the boy so much as stepped a toe into one of his classrooms.

Midoriya's odd demonstration during the Sport's Festival had inadvertently both solved and complicated the matter. Because while it was fantastic that the boy had been rocked out of his single-minded stupor, it also destroyed the ability to gather more evidence without more direct means.

Midoriya was his own headache. A quirkless student with severe hero worship and no training to speak of taking on one of the most powerful quirks in history and a mentor who is the most well-known hero in the past hundred years and (bless All Might's heart) one who is a bit of an idiot when it comes to interacting with other people.

And those were just the top five in Class 1A. Never mind the rest of the brood or what Class B entailed with their own issues.

Nezu popped the disk in, keeping a careful eye on the code passing over the screen. There were four video files here- though the older gentleman Sakane had claimed there was only one. He pressed his lips together as he clicked on the first video.

The view of a crowded street came into view in what looked to be a market district. For most, it would take some time to spot Katsuki Bakugou on the screen with his hoodie pulled up all the way and barely a wisp of blonde hair peaking out, but High Specs allowed him to find the boy long before the first pop of the Explosion quirk.

His eye took in the 'disguise' for there was nothing else it could be.

This wasn't too long after the Sport's Festival. It was telling that Bakugou, the prideful kid that he was, was already pushed to the point that he was hiding himself while out and about.

It was... alarming how fast the crowd turned on him the moment they knew the boy's identity. Nezu would have to reevaluating once again the Media shitshow around the kid. It seemed that he had, for once, underestimated how underhanded and mob like humans could be when faced with critical thinking skills (or, more precisely, their tendency to lack it).

The end of the video was... not surprising. Though for it to be a breaking point, for one such as Bakugou, it indicated a series of events like this one while out in public. Alarming, certainly, but not all together uncalculatable. This was an unnecessary piece of evidence to add into the already steep file, however, it was always good to have more of what was needed than less and this piece could very well help out in ways not yet foreseen...

Nezu moved to the other files on the disk, more hesitant and wary now.

His first thought was that these were likely extra feed of irrelevant time frames from the shop, but the devices downloaded showed they were not from the same feedback location. Suspicious. Especially given the old man's act of being feeble when he was most certainly able-bodied.

'Trap.' His mind whispered to him.

Nezu hummed under his breath a tune that was both familiar and alien. Something he'd half-listened to a long time ago and had never managed to forget as he activated the safety protocols for this wing. Overkill, no doubt.

Nezu pressed play.

The hands holding the phone were unpracticed. The camera lens moving about the room in a way that was sickening. When they stopped it was to see the face of Toga smiling at the lens.

"Hi! Big Sis wants to talk to you and she thought this would be the best way to do it." The camera swung around again even as Nezu's fur began to bristle. It wasn't real time. Nezu knew that. His systems would never allow such a breach.

The Villain did not want to talk to Nezu, they wanted to talk at Nezu.

Inform him.

He felt his paw hover over the alarm button anyways.

The choice was taken out of his hands though because before he could press down on it and call Ectoplasm and others to go after that crotchety old man Toga had clearly been wearing as a skin... the alarm began to blare.

“God damn it,” Nezu hissed.

Katsuki pulled his headphones out of his ears as he walked through the doors of the Dorm after his morning run. His classmates were gathered around something at the door. Hagakure leaping up and down and waving emphatically to him as he approached. A little weirded out, he sought out Mina’s familiar pink tone who was bent over something. She glanced up, her black eyes landing on him and grinning ear to ear. She gestures to him wildly.

“Blasty! Someone sent you flowers!” She screamed. “And it’s a big bouquet too!”

A pit opens up in his stomach.

It’s not the first time he’s been sent ‘*things*’ and the very idea that they might have touched something, that they might have *read* something, makes acid crawl up his throat and electricity shock his ankle hard enough to numb.

He stumbles as he lets the earbuds fall out, dangling from his pants pocket as he sees the bundle sitting right in the middle of *all* of them. He hears his phone hit the ground and is vaguely aware he barely dodges stepping on it as he practically runs over to them.

Mina must see *something* in his face because she’s half standing, staring at him in confusion and the beginnings of suspicion as she’s turning towards *it*.

“Get away from it!” Katsuki barked out.

“Don’t be like that,” Sato scolded him, folding his thick arms over his chest and giving him a disapproving look. “We were just looking.”

He caught sight of the ‘gift.’ Flowers. Black Dahlia and Orange Lilies, green leaves sitting carefully about the full-sized vase that had been delivered with care, sitting on their coffee table right in the middle of the fucking common room.

His classmates were hovering around it on all sides, Hagakure especially, smelling the flowers up close. Katsuki felt his heart leap into his chest. It could be... it might be...

“They must admire you a lot! They even got the flowers to match your costume!” Hagakure squealed.

“Guys...” Mina called softly, stepping closer to the thing.

But her voice was drowned out by Katsuki’s own roaring.

“Back off! Don’t touch it!”

Sato’s face twisted as he folded his arms over his chest, staring Katsuki up and down.

“Don’t be like that. Don’t you think its time you stopped treating us like...” the guy’s face fell, genuine hurt lining his face. “Well, like extras?”

“They even left a card!” Hagakure shouted excitedly, completely ignoring him.

“Blasty... what’s wrong?” Mina asked, coming closer, gentle.

Hagakure turned it over.

“Stop!” Katsuki rushed to grab it from her hands even as Mina tried to put her hand on his shoulder.

“Jeez! We’ll leave your stupid flowers alo...” Sato began mumbling.

“Hope you aren’t too lonely at the dorms, Sweetie! You’re always welcome to come visit us!” Hagakure read the note out loud. “OMG that’s so cuuute!”

Katsuki’s fingers grasped the notecard, paper tearing as it ripped in half between his grasp and Hakagure’s. His whole frame froze as his eyes lingered on the image in the corner of the notecard in his hand.

“Why’d you have to grab it. Rude,” Hagakure muttered. “ I would have given it to you if you asked nicely!” The girl huffed before

trailing off. “There’s no signature though. No name. Do you know...”

Her voice faded out.

It was the image of a motorcycle. Meticulously drawn in pen, the individual parts of the bike distinguishable, as if the person was intimately familiar with how the vehicle was put together. In a more hazardous fashion, by unskilled hands, the image of a knife had been added in red against the black ink of the motorcycle. The lines nearly blurry from how wobbly and chaotic the hand holding it must have been.

We see you.

Written in tiny, poor handwriting beneath the drawing.

They’re here.

There’s something crawling out of his throat.

It’s black and wrecks and they’re there. Watching him. All of them. Standing around him with vicious smiles intent on dragging him through that portal no matter how much damage it might do to him. There’re hands wrapping around his throat and Katsuki can’t...

He needs to create distance between them... he needs to...

Katsuki puts his hand out in front of him and detonates.

Mina sees what’s going to happen seconds before it actually does.

“...probably his mom,” Sato tells Hagakure.

“That’s boring! I bet he secretly has a lover he’s not telling us about...”

Mina leaps across the table and forcefully tackles Sato to the ground, Hagakure, the unfortunate soul to be directly behind him screams as she goes under the body builder’s torso as they all slam into carpet.

“The hell...?!”

Mina twists in a poor execution of a roundhouse kick, slamming her ankle against the table hard enough that a loud ‘CRACK!’ sounds through the living room as the table flips in front of them. Glass

shatters when the vase hits the carpet and the tips of her finger catch the top of the table before it can fall sideways, bracing her body against it and creating a shield between them and...

The world explodes.

She hadn't had time or thought to close her eyes before all three of them are thrown across the living room. Heat consumes both her shoulders and the back of her neck. It's hot like coals against her skin and she curls into herself as every tiny bit of movement causes agony to rip through her afresh.

There's something hot and slick against her fingers, but she can't open her eyes to check. She can't move! She can't... she *feels* her eyes try to roll into the back of her head. She digs her fingernails into the side of her thigh to keep her from losing consciousness.

She's not sure why that's important, just that it is.

It's hard to breathe and there's sharp twist in her chest and oh no, oh no, oh no... her fingers trail up slowly. They shake and fumble touching her own skin as she moves them doggedly upwards from her thigh to...

To something sticking out of side.

She convulses as her fingers touch it and...

Bone.

It had been bone.

That was bone.

She whimpers and does her best not to move. Not to breathe. Not to so much as let the sunlight fucking touch her because it hurt. It hurt. It hurt. She twitches as she fights another wave of her head trying to send her into blackness.

Dark was bad.

It was awful.

It was end of the line and Death had not been written by Terry Pratchett or Emily Dickenson like Kaminari liked to tell her... no. Death was mean and nasty and burning and hot and gross and hurt. It hurt so fucking bad.

Why weren't her friends coming to make this better?

Where were they?

She convulsed.

Her back arched and she let out a piercing scream that robbed her of all her energy and air. Something hot came up her throat. It spilled over her lips and sat sticky on her neck.

And then something pressed against her forehead.

She really wishes she could have flicked Death off like she knew Bakugou would. It's her last thought. Then nothing.

Chiyo pulls back.

She'd had to move the rib back into place before her quirk could knit the pieces into a healable state. Fractured bone removed from the bloodstream. Her hand pressing down hard on the still healing wound in her side.

It was a nasty sight, and if she hadn't been on campus, possibly a fatal one.

Whose to say.

There were many people in this world- even on this campus, with healing quirks. It was an ability suited well to heroics and heroic support. The girl had shielded her two classmates remarkably well. Taking the brunt of the damage, both of the explosion and the debris. The other two were worse for wear, but in no danger of losing their lives.

She wrapped everything up nice and tight, brushing pink locks away from a sweating forehead and ashen skin. Her breathing, even in unconsciousness, was labored and Chiyo would have to keep a careful eye on Mina Ashido over the course of what would surely be a long and dreadful few day.

She was very thankful Hagakure had not been severely injured, hidden bodily by her two classmates, the girl had zero ability to take anyone else's blood if a blood transfer was needed and it took a special type of quirk changing the literal properties at the base level

for the girl to have a back up system.

Chiyo had that backup system already prepared, of course, but there was only so long one could keep certain blood viable and the ones she had for the girl were close enough to the date that it made the old women cringe at the thought of using it.

Sato was...

Singed everywhere, a little toasty along a decent portion of his skin but his quirk- being strength based, had made him more tolerable to the backlash of a head on explosion and heatwave. Burn ointment one wrapped gauge from a particular large piece of glass going at high velocity had nicked him in the shoulder.

Chiyo's breath is shaky as she turns towards her last patient.

The front window of the Dorms was gone now.

Katsuki Bakugou was out on the front lawn, keeping a careful distance from Aizawa, the man's quirk fully activated. It had only been about ten minutes since Iida 'retrieved' her, dignity not intact, thank you very much.

There was no recognition in the boy's eyes and so far, he'd taken down three of his classmates quirkless as Shota tried and failed to draw him back from whatever dark place he'd fallen into. First Yaoyorozu attempting to reason with the boy, not realizing the child couldn't even hear her. Then Tokoyami who'd gone in to retrieve Yaoyorozu and who'd experienced a quick knock out that would honestly be impressive if it weren't remarkably terrifying.

And then Koda.

Who'd walked in at the worst possible time and had knocked into Bakugou as Bakugou had attempted to flee. The backspring using Koda's own shoulders before flipping over the child and slamming both feet into the small of Koda's back had sent the child headfirst into a dorm pillar where he hadn't gotten back up. Bakugou, on the other hand, had done a backspring and landed nimbly on his feet, crouching down and watching them like a cornered animal. Eyes blown wide and glazed, breathing hard as he fought remarkably well against a full-on panic attack. Or a flashback.

Chiyo was betting on the latter.

She finished wrapping Ashido up, the bots having arrived moments after herself. Carefully, she directed Iida and Todoroki to lift her onto the gurney before moving outside towards Koda. Jiro was already there, the girl had a hand laid gently on the other's back, one hand bracing the neck as she seemed to be doing a basic first aid check. A look of relief on her face telling Chiyo that the kid was alive (most likely steady) if not unharmed.

From this distance she could hear Aizawa speaking.

Quiet reminders of where Bakugou was that she was positive the boy wasn't taking in. Every step Aizawa took forward was met with a hand being held up and sparks attempting to explode before several steps back were taken.

"Back off, Aizawa," she called out. "Distance is your friend here."

He shot her a look of such intense annoyance a person of lesser years than her might be intimidated.

"I know."

"Then why do you keep moving forward?"

Aizawa's feet shuffled in place before digging deep into the ground. Lips pressing into thin lines.

She knelt beside Koda, her experienced fingers finding the minor fracture in the collarbone immediately. She kissed the boy's forehead, the bone knitting back within moments. A minor concussion at the right tempo lobe. He'd have been okay in a few weeks without her assistance. A much better case than Ashido.

She glanced behind her.

Bakugou's eyes were shifting all over the place, looking for an escape route but his eyes weren't actually taking anything in. Too frazzled. Panicked. Not in the here and now. She had to wonder where he was at right now.

The bar the League had kept him in was the obvious choice.

It wasn't the only one though.

There was also the underground hallways of the Sport's Festival arena the boy could very much be trapped in. She imagined the halls where

he'd been knocked out and dragged- chained up... more than likely was a place of nightmares for him.

Or he could be in his own hometown.

On the streets being cornered by a Villain who had assaulted and tried to murder him via possession/suffocation.

Katsuki Bakugou's file was not exactly small.

She knows more than most that sometimes there is no way to protect students from the world they are preparing them for. She's seen many dead bodies- many injuries that could not have been avoided no matter what anyone had done differently.

That wasn't the case with Katsuki.

With this student there had been teachers at fault in one of the incidents. Trauma had been dealt by educators. And not in the midst of training with a lesson in mind to prepare them for catastrophe work like she was often lecturing Aizawa about (an underground collapsing mall? Really?). So unnecessary.

An explosion warmed her skin.

Aizawa had blinked.

"Quickly dear, inside if you will," she smiled in reassurance at the frightened look on Jiro's face. "It's going to be okay."

"But..."

"Hurry now, before we both lose our eyebrows."

The girl gulped and nodded. The gurney moved Koda inside and as a consequence, away from Bakugou.

"What's..." Chiyo practically feels her body twitch at the sound of All Might's kid. She turns to see the wide-eyed expression of Izuku Midoriya looking around at the damage and his classmates on gurney's as she moves them through the backdoor. Lightning flickers for the briefest of moments along his skin as he seems to look for the enemy.

And then the boy's eyes land on Bakugou.

"Kaachan? What are..."

She watches as the eyes dilate. They seem to take in the type of damage then. The ash and burn marks. The broken furniture. The burns on skin.

“Kaachan...”

Chiyo reaches out and snatches the shoulder, holding the boy in place with a vise like grip before he can take off and make things worse.

“Izuku-chan,” Chiyo says soothingly. “Bakugou is suffering from a severe flashback.”

She states it simply.

She can feel the other students turning towards her. Listening in. And damn it if she despises the idea of revealing other people’s medical issues, this should have been something Bakugou revealed if he so chose, however... they no longer have the option of confidentiality. And with the boy refusing to see a therapist even after all this time- with no official documentation or diagnostic, with no help...

Well, this is what happens.

“He’s not in the here and now.” She continues firmly. “He’s not aware that it’s Aizawa and he wouldn’t be aware that its you. He’s stuck. In a very bad memory.”

The boy’s breath hitches.

She *feels* the body try to move forward, but her grip is tight and- yes, he could break it. He could make her fingers release him, but he doesn’t. He won’t. Even as his eyes are watering and he looks much like a broken child rather than a young man.

“Let go,” he says instead. Fierce. Shaking. Quiet.

“As admirable as your intentions, you will make it worse,” she tells him, not harshly. Stern and knowing. “You can help him best by remaining where you are. Don’t hurt him more than he already is.”

She adds the last part because she knows that’s the part he’ll listen to.

He does.

The small bits of lightning lingering along his skin fades.

“He did all this?”

It's not a question, but she answers anyways.

"Yes. We're not sure what the trigger was."

His shoulders hunched.

"I knew something was wrong," he whispered.

Chiyo shook her head.

"We *all* did child, but there is no way to make someone reach out to you."

Midoriya's lips press tight as he continues to look on.

"He's a professional when it comes to refusing to talk about stuff," the boy mumbles. It's not for her ears though. It's said to himself, lost in thought as his skin seems to move from pale to sickly as Aizawa moves in again.

This time though, Chiyo doesn't stop him. Because Bakugou has stopped moving and instead is holding himself tightly, staring at Aizawa with the barest hint of recognition even if he still doesn't seem to know where he's at.

In a few more moments the man has Bakugou's hand over his own heart.

A brave move even with the Eraser quirk.

Chiyo works on her injured students as they all listen to the quiet tones of Aizawa going through grounding techniques and breathing exercises with Bakugou for a long time. No one speaks a word. Not one word among the thirteen active students standing around, watching. Waiting. Holding their breaths. Holding each other's hands. Gripping shoulders. Huddled together in the remains of their dorms living room.

The kid's heart thrums like a hummingbird under his fingertips. Shota braces as they slowly move down to the ground together.

The glazed look is finally gone.

What's left is an exhaustion that looks soul deep.

Breathing that is hard fought to match his own and a heartbeat that takes forever to feel human again. He wants to look back at his other students. Wants to make sure they are all safe, but he knows, knows in his bones that if he looks away that the living bomb that is Bakugou Katsuki will ignite again, and they'll be the epicenter.

"You with me, kid?" Shota asks, keeping his voice as gentle as possible.

Bakugou goes to look at the building, to turn his head, but Shota stops him.

"Just look at me, kid, okay?"

A slow blink and an even slower nod follow.

"Good. I'm going to release my quirk. Can you keep from sparking?"

"...yeah."

"Good."

Shota's watering eyes burn as he let's his quirk go. His hair settling back on his shoulders as he takes in his student's tense form and lost look.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Shota asks.

He tries to keep his tone light. To keep his mind wandering from the kids being carried out in gurneys.

Shota had fucked up.

"It's happening again," Bakugou breathes out. He's shaking, Shota can feel it.

"Stay with me. Remember to keep your heartbeat matching mine? Okay?"

Bakugou shakes his head.

"What's happening again?" Shota asks.

But Bakugou is looking around them again, this time more carefully, taking in their surroundings like he expects monsters to crawl out

from the trees to attack them all.

“I’m going to set up an emergency session with Hound Dog. Not negotiable,” Shota sighs.

Bakugou flinches like Shota’s declared he’s going to expel him. As if the very idea of talking to someone about this was worse than the event itself. Shota feels a well of frustration overtake him. This kid... its unnatural.

Over the years he’d encountered plenty of kids unwilling to seek help. Kids who were stubborn or who were too socially awkward or who were too prideful... Bakugou seemed more terrified than anything. Which was why Shota had been so unwilling himself to push the kid too hard. To find a way that the kid would be comfortable going forward with.

They couldn’t wait any longer though.

His student was, as far as physical damage went, mildly singed. The most significant wound, a shard of glass sticking out of his leg. Bakugou seemed to not even notice the piece of vase, staring fixedly at something Shota couldn’t see.

[Didn’t want to see, to be frank.]

“Hey, hey,” Shota called softly, until the glazed-over eyes turned to him a bit. Letting him know that even if Bakugou was out of it, he was here enough to know Shota was here too.

Shoji set a first aid kit down beside them. Shota nodded acknowledgment to his student as he popped the box open.

“I’m going to take the shard out,” Shota said, pausing, “and stitch you up.”

Bakugou’s eyes lowered to the shard, staring at it blankly, brows furrowed.

And then the kid gripped it with the open palm of his hand and ripped it out himself.

Blood spurting out in a not insignificant amount.

Shota cursed colorfully as he grabbed the boy’s leg, clenching his fingers over the much worse wound. Hurriedly pulling out gauze and

bandages and shooting Bakugou an exasperated look that he was sure wasn't taken in.

The glass shard dropped onto the grass and before Shota could say or do anything else, Bakugou was dragging the first aid kit towards him, pulling out the stitching kit and threading the string in perfectly as if he'd done this a thousand times.

He gave his student a wary stare but didn't try to stop the kid. Watching as he hooked the skin and pulled it through with short, experienced ease. Not even flinching as he tugged to tighten the two sides of the wound together. Shota moved his hands as needed, wrapping the wound up quickly after Bakugou tied the knot and clipped it.

Shota took the hand, dripping blood from where Bakugou had gripped the glass and gently wiped it clean before bandaging it.

"I know this isn't the best time to ask, but unfortunately I don't have a choice." Shota looked his student in the eye. "I need to know what triggered this."

Bakugou's eyes scanned the dorms and the area around them. Lips pressed together as his brain seemed to be doing a slow reboot. Body tensing in the flight or fight (FIGHT!) way Shota had just calmed the boy down from.

"Th-the..." Bakugou stuttered, eyes wide as he looked up at Shota. The grasping words feel out of place coming from Bakugou of all people. The clenching of his fists though, the tiny sparks shooting off and smoke lifting from his hands IS. Shota allows his quirk to bleed through, quieting the explosions as Bakugou tries valiantly to find the words bouncing around in his head.

Red eyes bore into him demanding Shota know what the kid is trying to communicate without actual words being spoken. Demanding Shota instinctively grasp the emotions running rampant in front of him.

He wants to tell Bakugou that 'this' has never been his thing. Despite how many times in his life he's desperately needed it, the ability has slipped from his grasp with the ease of other's quirks under his gaze.

Bakugou swallows and the hand that shoots out nearly startles Shota as his shoulder is grabbed with such raw strength it actually causes him to wince.

“The league is here,” Bakugou finally spits out.

Shota’s blood runs cold.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 26: Painted Distress

The Emergency Session with Hound Dog

Chapter 27: Lines

Detective Tsukauchi Arrives

Painted Distress

Chapter Summary

*Author moves boulder in front of cave in the middle of unknown deep forest location

"This is fine. They can't get me here."

Chapter 26: Painted Distress

Once, when he was ten, his mom had one too many wine glasses at a party. She wasn't the type to risk her image doing something like that out in public. The day after she'd swear to Masaru that she'd only had two glasses. There had been a lot of men ogling his mom during the party too and she wasn't the type to lie.

Looking back, he thinks she must have been roofied.

It was one of the many parties they'd forced Katsuki to go to. After the Mall incident with Inko and Deku that had made both his mom and Auntie Inko give up on him entirely. The incident where Deku had finally admitted what Katsuki knew was always going to be the inevitable result.

Katsuki did what he always did at parties. He mingled for the exact amount of hours his mom wanted him to. Forced his tight shoulders to at least look relaxed. Stretched his face into a tight smile he hoped looked real and shook hands with a lot of people that- for humans who didn't have a sweat-based quirk, sure did a hell lot of it.

Tried not to spark off.

Kept the panic at bay of being surrounded by so many people by keeping his mind distracted with counting ceiling fan panes and tiles.

Gripped his wrist painfully behind his back whenever he felt like he might be slipping. His instincts were wrong; they were the instincts of a psychotic lunatic, someone who had no self-control whatsoever. The need to lash out, to make distance between himself and everyone around him.

Katsuki tried to stay back, out of range of any potential person looking to talk to him, but he wasn't allowed to leave. The last time Katsuki had left during one of his parent's parties, they'd grounded him from training for three months; only allowed to do the bare minimum to not fall into one of his bad cycles.

He wasn't sure how to tell his dad that the more he trained the more the physical demand to keep the nitroglycerin and adrenaline chemicals balanced became. That the bare minimum that they had set with the doctor even last year wasn't good enough now.

His mom already thought he and his quirk were unmanageable and bothersome. That all the dietary requirements and physical therapy that came with his anatomy were ridiculous to maintain and that Katsuki himself had become 'too much.'

She found him hiding, as casually as he could, behind a group of male models who featured clothing of the larger, more muscular variety. Their frames worked perfectly to stay as hidden as possible from the crowd while still, technically, being a part of it. The men, for their part, ignored Katsuki's existence so it was the best of both worlds.

Mitsuki slumped next to him, leaning against the wall and surprising the ever-loving fuck out of the ten-year-old.

"Yer supposed to be mingling," Mitsuki sniped at him. The words lacked their usual bite though, slurred as they were. Instead, she looked forlornly at him, eyes not quite focusing. "Katsuki, baby, I need you to... I need you to *not* be you, okay?"

Katsuki flinched.

"I think your drunk, mom."

"Am not," came the petulant reply. His mom looked thoughtful for a moment, squinting out at the people around them. "Maybe a little."

Katsuki snorted, looking down at his phone and the study notes for class he'd been reading when tiles had just about driven him mad by focusing on them for too long. His mom looked at him, a lazy look about her as her shoulders sagged even further.

"Kats, I do love you, I do," Mitsuki went on, making Katsuki pause. This was the first time she'd said anything like 'I love you' in a long time. He hadn't even realized how long it had been until her soft words spoke them. Almost fond. Katsuki turned to her, intending to

reassure her that he loved her too when she continued. "You're awful, you know. Fuckin' awful. It's so *hard* to love you."

A slap to the face would have stung less.

He looked away, feeling hot tears prick at his eyes.

She looked up at the ceiling, at all the tiles he'd spent most of the evening counting. She didn't even really seem like she realized Katsuki was still there.

"That's the thing about love," she said quietly, the words wobbly. "It's endless. No matter how many other emotions you have for someone... no matter how much you come to despise them... you can always love them too."

Katsuki felt sick.

He turned away from his mom and wiped the hot tears running down his face with his shoulder, hiding the deep snuffle that threatened to draw attention to them. Clamped his jaw tight as hard as he could to force the sound bubbling in his throat from making itself known. When that didn't work, he physically clamped his mouth shut with both hands.

"Katsuki," his mom slurred even worse. "Take me to the car."

His mom doesn't remember Katsuki leading her out of the party or that Katsuki had only made it about halfway out of the conference's winding hallways before he broke down in a hiccupping mess. She doesn't remember cooing at him and shushing him and telling him that he was embarrassing her or the way her stumbles had slowly turned more and more into leaning heavily and then entirely on her ten-year-old son. Mitsuki doesn't remember being dumped not so gently into the passenger seat or Katsuki crawling into the back seat and curling up to bawl his eyes out.

He was dry eyed by time Masaru came to the car. His phone had about a dozen missed text messages and phone calls and for once it was his dad yelling at him rather than his mom, but he'd zoned out and wasn't paying attention.

Not even when the yelling stopped and the anger turned to helpless confusion or when the car had turned on quietly and the silence that stretched for the next hour on the ride home.

It was only when they'd parked outside their home that Katsuki began to move, started to open the car door than spend another second there with them.

"What did she do?"

Katsuki had stilled. Feeling numb and exhausted, he'd looked at his dad, staring back at him through the rearview mirror, hands clenched white on the steering wheel. The woman in question hadn't so much as stirred, her dress disheveled in a way that would have pissed her off if she were coherent.

"Why did you two have me?" Katsuki asked instead of answering his dad's question.

The man's face morphed into something horrified, a series of emotions Katsuki couldn't read flickering across his face. He fiddled with the sleeve of his shirt, tugging at the stiff cuffs there as they sat in awkward silence.

"She told you then," his father said, resigned.

There was a long moment as a sickle dropped and Katsuki realized something was very wrong here. Something that neither of them had been telling him. He swallowed and... before he could convince himself otherwise, he nodded, watching the man carefully.

Masaru Bakugou sighed, looking extremely sad, which only sent more alarm bells through him.

"I love you, Katsuki, you know that, right?"

A stiff lump formed in his throat.

A foreboding sense of déjà vu.

"Your mother was... very persistent when she approached me about dating. She wouldn't take no for an answer." Katsuki felt his body stiffen as he listened. That wasn't like any love story he'd ever heard. Wasn't the direction he thought this conversation would take. "She never thought she'd meet someone in the fashion industry so compatible with her quirk."

Quirk?

Katsuki pulled harder on his cuff, until he felt thread beginning to

unravel between his fingers.

“We were *both* stupid for thinking we could...” Masaru hesitated, as if he wasn’t sure how to put it into words. “Our quirks are useless individually... at one point I thought I could be a hero, but I lacked power in my sparks. I thought: ‘what’s the harm? Who doesn’t want to be a hero? Of course, any kid of ours would want it. We wouldn’t need to push them into it especially if they had the perfect quirk for it.’”

Katsuki... didn’t understand.

But Masaru was on a roll and there didn’t seem to be a force on this earth that could stop him.

“And if our kid would be a perfect way to model quirk designed clothes and show off a little hero in the making? All the better.” Masaru mumbled, talking to the steering wheel now. “A way to launch a line of Hero Costumes with a hero whose name was our brand? It was playing the long game and a bit of luck but... we thought we could pull it off...”

Katsuki felt it click into place, staring at his dad numbly.

“I swear, Katsuki, we had no idea the side effects of our quirks combining would be so awful... or that you would be...” the man trailed off. As if words could not describe what Katsuki was.

“What?” Katsuki demanded. “That I would be what?”

He could hear the white knuckled grip creak against the steering wheel as the leather groaned under his father’s hold. The smile his father shot him was tight and pained.

“It doesn’t matter, Kat- I should... I should get your mother inside.”

The front door opened. He listened to his father walk around the car and open up the passenger side door, heard his mother groan as the man lifted her into his arms with a hefty grunt. Normally this would be the part where Katsuki would run to open the door for his dad, but he didn’t move an inch.

He didn’t move for a long time.

His dad never came back to check on him.

In the aftermath of hospitalizing his classmates, Katsuki feels numb.

Katsuki keeps his head down at the sound of his classmates walking about. Aizawa had gotten him to one of the couches inside the dorms, warding off the rest of Class 1-A with firm, glowing red eyes.

He's not sure if he's grateful for that.

Katsuki doesn't know if it was for his sake or theirs.

Doesn't know if his classmates would be silent like they had been after his kidnapping... wary glances and whispers where they thought he couldn't see. Or if they'd stand by and just... watch, like they had at the Sport's Festival. Or if they'd condemn him for it.

For once his own emotions are gone.

Everything's been carved out of him. Emotions. Reactions. Even thoughts have fled for a blank space that Katsuki can't seem to crawl himself out of. He doesn't remember his classmates being taken away. Only that Horns had been there before and now she wasn't. Katsuki had looked.

A loud, scraping sound could be heard all around them- the sound of the walls going up, Aizawa told the class. Katsuki doesn't go to the window to see what that means. He can see out of the corner of his eyes his classmates looking though. Giving him a break from the 'what have you done you psycho?' feel that had sat boring into him for the past however long.

He does see when thick boots stand in front of him.

Blankly, Katsuki looks up.

Hound Dog stares down at him with beady eyes and hands on hips. Held titled in a way that's clearly assessing and Katsuki wants to snort. Wants to laugh hysterically. As if the man hasn't already made his decision before he ever walked in here.

A finger moves in front of his face and Katsuki follows it.

He knows this game.

He doesn't have a fucking concussion.

He just fell off the deep end.

Harmed his classmates.

Again.

Though this time it wasn't by standing by and doing fucking nothing like some weak-kneed child. Katsuki bit his lip. No. He'd...

"Can you walk?" The gruff voice didn't surprise him, but Katsuki very nearly still jumped. Instead clenching his hands on the knees, he was holding with a white knuckled grip.

He nodded.

"Good. Come with me."

Stiff. Stiff as stone Katsuki forced his feet under him and stumbled after the man, ignoring the eyes following him out the door. Seeing the tall, iron walls lifting around them was as unnerving as it was awe inspiring. Holy fucking shit. It never ceased to amaze him how much U.A spent and with such carelessness.

As carelessly as YaoMomo filled their cabinets with groceries and delighted asking everyone their favorite items- even though Katsuki had blatantly and pointedly ignored her questions, his cabinet had stilled been carefully filled with spices and teas. Deku looking guilty as hell under his gaze, avidly avoiding his eyes those first few shopping days.

Shitty nerd.

"Nezu suspects the League intruder was Toga," Hound Dog tells him, voice deep and growling. "Pretending to be a concerned citizen."

Katsuki nods because fuck all if he knows what he's supposed to say to that. He doesn't even have the emotions in him to feel vindicated. Not when his classmates were lying on hospital bedsheets because of him.

He sees his teachers- Pro heroes, moving about the campus.

There are dozens of Ectoplasms marching about, the clinking of his legs resounding like gunshots in the distance. It's unnerving.

"You're in shock," Hound Dog tells him. "There's no point in talking."

Katsuki blinks, feeling stupid, as the words don't seem to hit right in his brain.

He hadn't really thought talking was the point of dragging him out of the dorms like that. There was a vague sense that he was being led somewhere for what he deserved. To be punished. To be locked away. To be shipped off.

The idea of talking hadn't even occurred to him.

What was the point?

What more could he fuck up by talking?

Katsuki didn't really feel like- even when he told them what he'd done... what he hadn't done at the camp and before that it would make any difference to anyone now. It was too late. The only reason to come forward would be to explain why the school was being targeted... again. To explain his own culpability in all of this. To confess.

To give reason for all this... this fucking bullshit.

He blinked as the trees turned into cement.

Ground Beta.

This was the place he'd first fought Deku on campus. The first time he'd witnessed One For All in use. Fully comprehended that Deku had a quirk- one that could utterly destroy Katsuki if he was ever hit by it directly. The place where he'd realized how the nerd had gotten into U.A. Where the downward Spiral began.

He swallowed.

Where he'd thought... for the first time, that there would never be a point where he escaped Deku. Where he was forced to acknowledge that Deku would *always* be there no matter how far Katsuki ran.

It left a tired sort of feeling in his bones.

The idea that he would spend the rest of his life being compared to the other in an unfavorable light. It was a concept as familiar to him as breathing. It wouldn't matter if Katsuki was the worst hero in history or the brightest. Whether Deku would be a shadow or a beacon. The comparison would always be there.

Of course... Katsuki had a feeling that he wouldn't be a hero at all.

So maybe it would be a different story.

Maybe Deku would be the only one moving forward. Maybe this was it for him. The end of the road where his career was officially done and Katsuki cast aside where everyone always said he'd end u...

His foot hit something.

Katsuki stared down at it.

The paint can wobbled. Bright orange splashing across cement before steadying. His brows furrowed as he looked around. They were facing a large blank wall, plastic covering the windows and a ridiculous amount of random paint colors all over the place.

"I've spoken to Aizawa extensively about you and we agreed to try different types of therapy to see what helps you best."

Katsuki blinked, looking around for the anvil waiting to drop. For someone to step out of the shadows with handcuffs and a vicious grin to tell him this was a joke. He opened his mouth to speak... but there was nothing. Not even a breath of air.

"It doesn't matter what you do here, what you paint, but I want you to at least try this." Hound Dog told him firmly. "I'll be standing guard. No one is getting to you here. Go wild." The man paused. "Or if you want to just... sit on the ground and finger paint... that's fine too. Just... just try to get some of that anxiety and pain I see in your eyes out on the canvas. This might be good for you and if its not... I promise we'll find something else."

And then the man stepped back.

One step then another.

Katsuki stared at him in utter bewilderment.

And then he was out of sight.

Looking around at the paint, Katsuki couldn't help but grimace. Working with his hands had always been more complicated then people made it seem. Whatever he chooses to do would mean contaminating it with nitroglycerin. He would literally be making art bombs. Still... this was on ground beta. And they could always blow it up soon after it was completed. No need for this to ever see the light of day.

Katsuki looks around.

Faltering.

He doesn't...

He avoids the paint brushes all together, dipping his hand into the black paint. It pools cools against his fingers as he throws it against the wall. It splatters, mostly on the floor, but somewhat across the blank space of wall. It does it again and again, throwing black paint and splattering it as if he's trying to...

To what...?

He lets his hand fall as he stares.

Flecks of black were everywhere, black globs oozing down the wall in a messy bundle. Katsuki used his fingers to move the globs about, not really having an idea in mind. Not really thinking at all.

He'd had art lessons once upon a time. One of the many, many ways his mother forced him outside of the house. Music lessons. Art lessons. Fashion lessons. Etiquette lessons. Anything and everything to try to force him to be more refined.

They hadn't gone well.

Obviously.

There were a few picked up with more interest than others, but he'd basically done them out of duty. Forging his own personality into each of them to the point his parents had resented him for his successes.

Drums for music. Loud, brass- so unlike the flute his dad had wanted him to pick up.

Using his hands instead of brushes for art, chalk, to the point his mother had withdrawn him because of course, 'of course, Katsuki, you would find a way to make even *art* a chaotic mess I have to deal with.'

Fashion lessons.

Used to present as much grunge as possible even while still courting the lines of what was in fashion. Dark colors to contrast his parents preferred high fashioned pastels and royals. No maroon or jade or cobalt in sight.

Etiquette lessons.

Ha!

Enough to know exactly how not to accidentally present himself as amiable to conversation. To steer clear of being socially welcoming. Those lessons had earned him a permanent ban from traveling with his parents or attending their parties.

The paint was nothing like chalk.

It didn't spread the same way. The lines he made were wet looking and left gaps where his chalk would normally have a faded look to it. He found the lines he normally was able to manipulate pretty easily instead *moved*.

H didn't like it.

There was a certain lack of control that came with paint that Katsuki found he hated.

The blankness in his mind persisted even when Katsuki tried to take deep breaths and examine the black against cement more carefully. There was a certain floaty feeling that no matter how hard he blinked or tried to focus refused to dissipate and Katsuki felt himself falling into the familiar pattern of moving and acting without actually being there.

His hands were stained black past the wrists.

Cold at first, but as he kept dipping into the paint tins, his hands warmed the paint... or his skin cooled. One of those two. Katsuki was smarter than this. He knew the right answer, but nothing worked right now.

It was like...

He pressed his thumb deep into the paint, bringing it down sharply. He felt the fresh paint pressing against his shirt and pants. They were being ruined. Expensive joggers, a shirt his mom had helped his dad design, the large pockets of black sewn with white string to stand out. Cobalt stitching interwoven with the white. His mom had loved the design.

Black paint practically soaked the pockets now.

Causing it to stick to Katsuki's skin, squishing in a way that practically screamed he was making a mess of things. Of everything. Like always.

His hands shook. Had they been shaking the whole time?

He wasn't sure.

He tapped his head against the wet paint on the walls.

The smell was too strong.

Like breathing in poison.

His fingers gripped at the cement as he tried to brace himself. As he felt his lungs fill with the too strong smell. Almost like... like the blood that had been stained into the chair he was chained to. Three days of the staunch, lingering scent of iron, feeling the leather against his skin. Waking to it.

Katsuki backed away and found himself falling on his ass to get away from that smell. He backed away until his own back hit the wall and found himself staring at the sheer mess he had made.

It wasn't pretty or well done.

It was fucked.

Worse than Deku's notebook drawings. At least with those you could tell what the nerd was attempting to make. This was just... black, vague figures with lines that dripped downwards. A black, childlike image of a sun that looked as if it were melting.

Hound dog walked into the room, staring at the wall with a slightly tilted head before he ambled over and sat next to Katsuki at a careful distance.

"Better?" Hound Dog asked.

Katsuki shook his head.

"No."

Hound Dog nodded as if he expected this answer.

"Can you tell me what you *are* feeling then?" Hound Dog prodded.

"I don't know," Katsuki told his knees, keeping his hands as far away from him as possible, keeping the smell of blood away from him. "Like I'm sh- like I'm awful at painting, I guess."

His voice was blank. Lacking any bite.

“It is pretty terrible,” Hound Dog said thoughtfully. “How did the act of painting feel to you?”

“Hated it,” Katsuki muttered. “It’s too messy and the smell is awful.”

The man’s nose twitched, wrinkling.

“The smell is pretty strong,” Hound Dog agreed easily. “There are hundreds of different medians though so I’m sure we can find something more suitable.”

“It’s also a bomb,” Katsuki found himself saying, black paint dripping off of his hands and down his pants. “My nitroglycerin’s mixed with the paint by this point. The whole wall will have to be blown up to get rid of it.”

“Duly noted. Anything else I should know?”

“Any type of art that requires me to use my hands will turn into a danger to others,” Katsuki told him. “Clay. Paint. Chalk. If it can mix with my sweat, it will pose a problem.”

“Good to know. Do you have a preference in what you like to work with?”

“I have experience using chalk.”

Hound Dog hummed.

“Okay, but that isn’t quite what I asked. I want to know what you like, not what you are good at. It’s all well and good to succeed at something, but not everything you do for yourself, or others has to be done well.”

Katsuki blinked at the man, confused. He found himself glancing at Hound Dog, those eyes still staring at Katsuki’s shit painting. Like it was a puzzle instead of globs of paint sliding down the wall in poorly made lines.

As if it were hiding secrets or some shit.

“Practice makes perfect,” Katsuki said carefully. “You got to start out somewhere and you ain’t gonna be a master in a day and all that other wise sensei of patience and understanding nonsense. Everything takes hard work. There’s no point in doing something if you don’t intend to

do it well at some point.”

Hound Dog hummed.

“You don’t have to be good at something you enjoy or something you do. Some things aren’t about mastering them but reveling in them. Like... playing video games or entertainment... going to the movies... these are things that we as humans love even if they don’t necessarily *do* anything or *produce* anything.”

Katsuki snorted.

“You have to earn them first.”

Hound Dog cocked his head.

“How so?”

“You can’t just...” (fuck off, Katsuki wants to say). His hands gesture at the air uselessly. “...go off and do what you want. You *earn* going to the movies or playing games or reading a book. It’s a product as much as anything.”

Hound Dog’s eyes narrowed on him, but his body language was at ease, casual even.

“When was the last time you earned the right to revel in something fun then?” Hound Dog asks him lightly.

Katsuki blinks up at the Pro Hero.

He...

Well...

He tries to think back to the last time he’d done something of real merit. The last time he’d earned doing something nice for himself. It was... huh... I-Island. He’d considered defeating those Villains to be something worth wild. He’d bought himself a book. He hadn’t actually read it though.

It was in the bag with the white shoes.

The one Kirishima had retrieved for him when they’d packed up the camp. Katsuki had left that bag behind in his old room at the house. Hadn’t been able to bare looking at it for longer than it took to remove that cursed phone from it.

He'd brought it with him just in case he'd have time at the camp (what a joke).

Before that...

There wasn't anything to be proud of really.

The Final Exam Katsuki had been knocked unconscious for and had been dragged through the gate by Deku like some kind of invalid. Katsuki had fucking thrown himself in front of the attack All Might had tried against Deku- had garnered the time Deku needed to get through the gate and the fucker had made that sacrifice worthless. Had decided to show Katsuki up by backtracking and taking on All Might by himself to... what? Prove how much fucking better he was than Katsuki? To mock the fact that it was Deku himself who got them through the exam rather than Katsuki's sacrifice? Bullshit. 'We can't fight All Might, Kaachan! But here, let me fight All Might and rescue useless Katsuki at the same time.'

The entire fucking speech Deku had made about working together had been a ruse. A means to get Katsuki to let his guard down. He should have fucking known better. But like always, the little asshole tried to play innocent.

"I couldn't leave you behind, Kaachan."

Fucking lies.

That had been the WHOLE fucking point. Invalidating his sacrifice had been for Deku, not Katsuki. Coming back for him when he had worked so hard to create that fucking opening had risked them failing the exam. All Might had *let* Deku punch him. Had let Deku take Katsuki and run through the gate. All it had done was prove that Deku cared more about making sure Katsuki knew he was morally superior than working with Katsuki and 'getting along.'

His humiliating internship with Best Jeanist? The Pro Hero had hated him and Katsuki hadn't learned anything there, much less accomplished anything. Meanwhile Deku had spent HIS internship exploring his own quirk and finding ways to imitate Katsuki's own style. Integrating it into his own- like Katsuki hadn't spent literal years investing in developing those moves by himself with no training and no one helping him.

Stealing them as easily as Deku took everything else.

Those thoughts made him feel cold. A chill seemed to overtake him as he sat in the slowly drying paint.

A hand gently touched his shoulder and Katsuki leaped back as if burned, a paint can spilling over as he moved to put as much space between him and the other.

Hound Dog stared back.

The rough mane ruffled, looking distinctly like a pissed-off house cat even as the man himself appeared calm and collected as ever.

“I’ve been calling your name for a while, Bakugou,” Hound Dog told him quietly. “Does this happen often?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Katsuki hissed defensively. “I just didn’t hear you.”

He hunched his shoulders, looking anywhere but at the man.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I asked my last question?” Hound Dog was unreasonably gentle, and it pissed Katsuki off even as the man pushed another question. “Do you know how long you’ve been painting in this room even?”

Katsuki shrugged.

“About an hour?” he guessed.

“I’ve been trying to talk to you for about twenty minutes now.” Hound Dog said, blunt, voice an odd mix of searching and knowing that left Katsuki unnerved. “After what happened this morning, I didn’t want to initiate physical contact in any way that might startle you, but you were dissociating for so long I grew deeply concerned.”

There were no windows in the building, but somehow the light felt... dimmer. Before every nook and cranny in the room was light up. Now shadows danced on the wall and the only light was a lamp in the corner.

“When someone is dissociating,” Hound Dog spoke gently, explaining things as he took a careful step back. “It’s best to lead them outside. Usually, it takes a while to slowly coax them out of- in most cases, their overstimulated senses by introducing fresh air and grounding items. However, your PTSD symptoms or adrenaline-based biology- I can’t say for certain which or both or if it’s something else entirely,

appears to have snapped you out of it at an alarming rate.”

“Dissociating?”

Hound Dog nodded.

“It could have also been a severe flashback. Its too early to tell,” the man admitted. “Or perhaps another matter entirely.” Hound Dog shrugged. “The first mistake anyone can make is thinking the mind can be easily boxed into labels or explained away by symptoms of one thing or another. Our diagnosis is meant to be tools to make things easier but often times people allow our own tools to confine our understanding rather than aide it. It might be true that you are dissociating, but it also might be true that you only experience one or two things there when there are dozens of symptoms and habits under the category. Your symptoms might fit well into five different issues and together they will paint an entirely new area to walk through that belongs to no one specific problem. It’s best to tackle each piece as we encounter them and try to create a plan that is flexible enough to handle all the different moving parts in a way that best benefits you and your needs.”

Katsuki shuddered, realizing for the first time that this was a therapy session.

‘Fuck.’

It should have been obvious, but somehow it hadn’t clicked in his brain that *this* is what was happening. And like a poorly constructed Beaver dam the rest broke free, taking beavers and all down the river to drown every unfortunate critter unlucky enough to be near the edge.

“Who did I hurt?” Katsuki croaks out.

No one was in the dorms.

Katsuki had scrubbed the paint off in the shower. His ankle is deeply swollen. Electrical burns mixing with a rash that’s concerning in a ‘oh lookie there, don’t know what the fuck to do about that’ sort of way. The stitched gash is less so and he does his best to keep the area dry so that it doesn’t get infected. It twinges only a little bit when he pulls on a pair of training sweats. The ankle is harder to deal with. He pulls

socks gingerly, testing his own weight on the damaged leg.

It holds.

Not satisfied, he moves through a simple warm up exercise, moving his ankle in various rotations and flexing as far as he can. It stings. There's some limitation in how far he can flex which is unacceptable. He breathes through his nose as he debates his options.

There aren't many.

Katsuki isn't exactly the captain of his own emotions. He's tried to forcefully and single handedly take over the ship of unruly, unmanageable shitbags that steer the thing to no fucking satisfaction. Grounding techniques. Avoiding people as much as possible. Pushing them down. Keeping quiet. Not involving himself in any conversations.

But Katsuki has done that since the beginning.

He never wanted to be close to anyone. He didn't want the anxiety that came with that. People forcing him to go to events. Forcing him to play nice, forcing him to act a certain way, think a certain way, be a certain way.

These people who are... who are able to just be themselves without consequences... without being stalked or punished or worked into the ground because everyone else seems to be exactly who they were supposed to be. And Katsuki simply isn't.

Yeah, Katsuki's not the Captain of his own ship.

The ship is barrowing forward to some destination with a crew that doesn't seem to care if it's a beach or rocks that they're heading towards while Katsuki is chained up in the belly of the ship and will be the first to drown or die if it sinks or crashes.

There are no other obvious solutions that present themselves though.

There's no lock to remove it.

Which, granted, Katsuki could easily get Kirishima to break it. But... that means Dr. Kobayashi will know and he'll be denied his license permanently. Which means removing it himself isn't a solution but a condemnation.

No way to convince his therapist to do so either. Kobayashi had ignored every concern Katsuki had brought up about how the piece of shit affected his health. How his quirk and chemical make up made the thing incompatible with the intentions the fowl woman had in mind.

Katsuki wraps it with a small ice pack bound to it and then rebandages his leg.

It's easy to focus on these thoughts when there's no one else around. To focus on the steady rhythm of wrapping and binding, wiping stray blood from the stitches and ensuring gets infected. It's easy to take his mind off the reason why the dorms are deserted. Why the quiet is so much more intense and terrifying.

But once it's over and a fresh pair of clothes sit against his still damp skin he has to recognize that he needs to stop being a little bitch and face what he's done. He can hear the wall so UA coming down now. Cranking in the distance to reveal the outside world in all its normalness.

The entire campus, despite being early evening and the time when even the latest of heroics classes let out, was eerily silent. A few scattered third year students hurrying about without looking at one another or drowning the day in their normal chatter.

It's hard to swallow at the thought that the reason his classmates weren't in the dorms in lock down was because they were all crowded in the clinic. Around a number of beds with his classmates in it. Classmates that he... His hands shake as he meets Hound Dog at the entrance. The man had waited; as a Pro hero protecting his charge or as a Pro hero watching a potential criminal though... What did you call a person who harms their own classmate?

Over the last year there had been plenty of things thrown at him. Reckless endangerment. A menace unaware of his own strength. A monster well aware in his own strength and taking pleasure in the pain of others. A student whose power and arrogance would lead to the death of any heroes who worked with him and whose protection of the civilians would be none-existent at best and compromised at worst.

The way Katsuki's presence at the Camp had compromised his classmate's safety.

Either way Hound Dog knew he'd entered the common room before

Katsuki had put his first foot down. Head tilted slightly up to sniff the air every few minutes, ears twitching on high alert even though it appeared that everything had been called off. He didn't turn to Katsuki, instead he let his arms drop and stood facing the door, ready to head out.

All of this... not because of the League of Villains.

That required them to *be* here.

No, all of *this*- putting the school on high alert, the walls coming up, Hound Dog being used as some weird guard type for a single student. All because Katsuki had a fit.

Katsuki had been wrong.

His panic hadn't even been fucking warranted. He'd *brutally harmed* Horns. For what? How was... how was blowing up fucking glass with an explosion large enough to *kill someone* productive? What had he been thinking?

That was what really killed him.

Katsuki always prided himself on his logics in battle. His strategy. Knowing when to rely on advanced planning and when to rely on instincts. When to play it defensive and when to go all out. When he tries to follow his own thought patterns up to the point of igniting there's only a blank space. None sensical words running rampant.

Paranoid words.

It wasn't like any of the League had a quirk that could use flowers or glass... it wasn't like they could have used flowers to attack them. The words couldn't hurt Katsuki. They were just words. And Katsuki let them get to him.

"Intense look on your face there," Hound Dog spoke into the quiet, voice rumbling. "What's on your mind?"

Katsuki stares blankly at the man.

So casual. Like Katsuki could bundle up the years and events that had created his thoughts and put it into a single sentence. Like anything he could say in the 100 or so feet they had left could possibly make sense to a stranger.

Hound Dog looks at him contemplatively, not at all bothered by the silence.

“Tell me, Bakugou, are you not answering because you don’t want to or because you don’t have the right words or time to explain your thoughts or because you feel overwhelmed by your thoughts and the idea of trying to say them feels too much or because you don’t know me and therefore you don’t know if you can trust me?”

Katsuki grunts, looking away from the man, shrugging his shoulders.

“A combination of a couple of those things then?” Hound Dog prods.

“I guess.”

The man nods. Like he already can guess which ones and that makes him feel immensely uncomfortable. Makes his hackles rise but fuck him. He doesn’t know shit. And he’s so utterly exhausted by people who seem to think they do.

Who seem to think they know why Katsuki doesn’t bother with names or doesn’t want to get to know anyone or has no interest in hanging out or doesn’t like Deku. That’s all people ever do is *assume* they know Katsuki’s reasons even when he doesn’t really know.

Katsuki feels brittle and on edge.

As they walk into the clinic his emotions shift like whiplash, like the back kick of his own quirk as he throws an explosion forward and feels his body going backwards with the momentum and propulsion.

He doesn’t *deserve* to be agitated or hurt.

Not after what he’s down.

His clothes are stained with paint while his classmate’s clothes are still stained with blood.

For the first time in his life, he wants to turn and run. There’s been plenty of parties he’s wanted to avoid people in, but it’s always been distant feelings of claustrophobia. The anxiety of just being around people.

This feels more intimate.

As he shuffles down the hallway filled with his classmates in various poses of waiting... sleeping... pacing... leaning against one another in

exhaustion... talking quietly to one another... together, as one, their eyes find him.

And no one says a word.

Katsuki feels sparks begin to warm his hands and clenches them, the heat being swallowed up and burning his palms as he shoves them into his pockets. He stares ahead as Hound Dog leads him through his classmates who part quietly.

The Pro hero pokes his head into one of the rooms for a moment.

He knows it's brief because the clock on the wall only ticks by a few seconds, but it feels like ages as he keeps all his focus on the mechanical whirl.

“Go on in,” the man says.

Katsuki stiffens even further, all his joints locking up. Because fuck, he didn't think this through. Suddenly facing up to what he'd done didn't seem nearly as brave and felt far more selfish.

What if Katsuki was the *last* thing they wanted to see. What if seeing him made them feel worse? What if they were afraid of him now? What if they...

He felt a hand push his back hard enough that Katsuki stumbled forward through the room, feeling the buzz of a familiar green lightning across his skin as he found himself falling more than walking into the room.

Ashido lay sitting up in the bed.

Katsuki felt all the air in his lungs freeze up.

There were bindings across her entire chest and ribcage. Her leg in a casing. Her head and arms were bandaged. He could see black and blue bruising forming along her face. Pale. Ashen grey on the normally pink tint.

Sero half stood out of his chair to stare at him.

Kaminari's wide eye surprise hanging by the window and Kirishima... Kirishima had lines long half his face, hardening at the sight of him.

His heart shattered at the looks on their faces.

It hurt.

It hurt so much worse than he thought it could.

Learning that he had been designed (and that Katsuki had failed at what they had created him for) was not as big a transition as one might think.

Really, Katsuki had been aware, on some level, that he had failed to be what his parents wanted. He just hadn't realized to what extent. The realization that his mother despised him for this had been almost... liberating.

Her obsession with comparing him to Deku still baffled him. Her refusal to cut ties with Katsuki, her need to argue with him all the time, her want to make him into someone else... none of it made sense.

But *this*...

The one thing she can't and never would deny was that Katsuki was a prodigy, and his quirk meant he was designed to be one thing: a weapon. Whether that was as a Villain or as a Hero had been up for debate since very early childhood. A war they had waged with one another from nearly the beginning.

With Katsuki desperately, vehemently claiming to be a hero.

He would be.

He would be.

He would be.

He would be.

He would be.

He would be.

So he fought for the number one spot in school. He fought to do everything perfectly. Fought to keep everything clean in the house, in his chores, in his gear. Stuck to a strict schedule. Made himself into the perfect example of what a would-be hero should be.

Prove that the drawbacks of his quirk could be used to his advantage.

Prove that he didn't need to be some kind of social butterfly to thrive in a social environment.

Prove that he could win at school and training and all the extra lessons and be the person they originally wanted even if he didn't quite fit the mold they'd first envisioned.

Katsuki could be worth something.

Katsuki could be perfect.

Exactly what they want.

He could do all the things they wanted from him.

Except...

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"Hey Blasty," Ashido's voice is rough. One eye is partially swollen shut and it looks painful, but she raises her arms wide from her hospital bed anyways. "I really need a hug right now and I know for a

fact that you give the best hugs.”

Katsuki doesn't understand.

And then there are hands pulling him towards the bed. Hands of rock and hands that have static electricity running along their fingertips and hands that are long and large as they wrap around his wrist as they pull him through the clinic's hospital room and arms that gently push him towards two ashen pink arms that weakly pull him forward.

Katsuki tries to talk but no words come out.

“Like your all that's between me and falling, remember, Blasty?” Horns whispers weakly. Desperately. As if she needs Katsuki, the monster who put her in that bed, to be here.

Katsuki finds himself putting a knee on the edge of the bed so that he can wrap both arms around her back. Her arms wrap around his waist and she's warm. Just like on the field when they were both gross from working out for so long.

And suddenly her arms aren't the only ones around him.

“You're keeping me from falling, Blasty,” Ashido tells him, her hands clenching the back of his shirt. “And we're gonna keep you from falling too.”

Lines

Chapter Summary

Izuku and Katsuki talk.

Detective Tsukauchi has been extremely busy in his investigation and both Aizawa and Katsuki learn more than they can handle.

Izuku paces aggressively as he tries to figure out how he misunderstood their relationship for so long.

*Waves white flag.

I had to cut this chapter up into three parts. It ended up being like 25,00 words so now you get a few extra chapters this week because I COULD NOT get it into one

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Katsuki is NOT suicidal, but Tsukauchi notes that the kid does have a line that is very similar in nature and has the capacity to turn rapidly.

So, I'm still putting a TRIGGER WARNING on this chapter for suicide discussion.

Chapter 27: Lines

At the end of the day, the person who knows Katsuki more than anyone else sits next to him in the busy halls of the clinic. Hands on knees and staring forward, like he knows looking at Katsuki right now will set him off.

Ashido was asleep and Katsuki doesn't have the nerve to visit any of the others.

Kirishima, Kami and Sero had all gone to visit though. Moving about the class like they belonged because they *did*. Katsuki hunkers down more, making so his own head bobs shorter than the green locks sitting stiffly beside him... like he's expecting Katsuki to blow him to pieces at any moment.

“Everyone is worried about you,” Deku whispers.

Katsuki snorts.

“Really,” Deku tells him in that emphatic ‘I’m lying through my teeth’ way of his that everyone else seems to buy into. “No one blames you for what happened. Their confused...?”

Katsuki shrinks in on himself at the question, glaring a hole into his knees.

He can’t exactly tell Deku to fuck off. They deserve to know why Katsuki went psycho-bitch on them. Why the walls of the school went up. Why he nearly killed...

He swallows to keep his breathing steady.

Deku hums like Katsuki divulged the secrets already. Maybe for him he has. Deku’s always *assumed* to know what Katsuki is thinking. It’s one of the many things that had ended their friendship as kids. Still, he’s fucking right when he talks next.

“You don’t know.”

The words are condemning. Katsuki bends forward a bit, his knees go up until their touching his forehead and he focuses on the way the cloth feels against his skin. The color. The faint smell of smoke and too sweat caramel like sweat.

A shoulder nudges his. Gentle. A knee taps against him with a feather like touch.

“Do you remember,” Deku mumbled, in the way he used to in class when he wanted to tell him something but didn’t want the teachers to hear. The Nerd was so obvious in his leaning forward though that he was always caught. It was the way that later became his creepy mumbling with the knowledge that no one- Katsuki included, wanted to listen to him. “You used to spark off all the time in school. Your palms would just... randomly ignite and suddenly your pencil would be destroyed or there would be a giant chunk of your desk missing. Everyone started treating you differently. They always walked around you in this wide birth and even though you were trying, they’d get really angry with you for it.”

Katsuki shivered.

His parents had been upset with him a lot during that time too.

Deku leaned back, his head ‘thunking’ against the wall behind them.

“That was right before you started disappearing during the summer.” Deku was staring up at the ceiling, no hand on chin, like normal, even though it looked like a thousand thoughts were going on behind his head. “Mom said Auntie Mitsuki sent you to special training for your quirk because it was dangerous.”

Katsuki didn’t say a word. He was pretty sure he didn’t even breathe.

“You came back with perfect control...” Deku went on, almost casually. “Everyone was so impressed with you. The teachers sang your praises and you... you preened over it. You paraded around like a jerk.”

Contrary to the words, Deku didn’t look annoyed or even have his ‘holier than thou’ air about him. There was what could only be described as fondness. Katsuki hated it.

“...but you also made sure no one ever got close to you.” Katsuki looked away, ignoring the prodding those words hinted at. “You... changed after the special training. It was like...”

He needed to stop him.

“Stop making up nonsense, Deku, nothing bad happened there,” Katsuki spat.

It was the summer he’d first fainted too. When they found out all the medical issues that would come with Katsuki’s power. When the old man told him he was a failed eugenics mishap and that he was more trouble than he was worth. It had been one shit show after another and all centered around his quirk.

When he’d come back from the training- both for the medical stuff and his quirk, it had been to a whole new lifestyle where relaxing and having fun simply wasn’t something that could be fit into the schedule anymore unless he worked really, really, really hard to get everything else done.

It was the summer when his mom decided she would ‘make’ Katsuki into the person they needed him to be and that all the extra classes started coming into play. Where she started trying to make him ‘social’ and be civil at parties and galas.

How to pretend.

And there had never been someone Katsuki had tried so hard to convince than the one sitting next to him. There had always been a sense that he could convince Deku of all fucking people that everything was peachy then... well, everything was.

He *felt* Deku shrug against him, the other humming again.

“Maybe.”

Deku’s way of calling him out. Katsuki wanted to roll his eyes. He never did listen. Never...

Something stung.

Oh.

Katsuki blinked down at his leg. He could see his ankle from where his head was against his knees. Swollen. Discolored. There was blood... running down his white sock. He blinked at it for a long, long moment as his brain tried to catch up. The blood was mostly dried, if he moved his pant leg a little, he could feel the way his skin resisted as the blood stuck between the flesh and cloth.

He sat up straight, stretching his hands across his pants in a way he hoped looked like he was straightening out the wrinkles. The cloth moved down over his ankle, over the bracelet. He crossed the injured foot behind his good one as he tried not to think about how long the damn thing might have been exposed for anyone to see.

“There’s no ‘maybe,” Katsuki sighed, trying not to let his hands clench over the pants. He folded them instead, squeezing hard to calm himself. “Nothing happened. Not everything is connected. Christ, you sound like Todoroki.”

Deku sputtered at that, blushing.

“Kacchan,” the whine was familiar. It almost made him feel better to hear it on some weird level, better than the ‘I’m here to try to comfort you while getting information!’ bit he’d been trying to pull a moment prior. Then the serious face was back. The big green eyes turned on him with all the power of the nerd’s All Might collection. “Kacchan, listen.”

Katsuki looked away.

“Really, you need to hear this, please.”

“Just get on with it,” Katsuki grunted.

There was a sigh.

“I know... we all know it's not really our business to pry...”

And like always, Kacchan assumed he knew where the conversation was going.

“It won't happen again,” Katsuki interrupted sharply, before swearing darkly under his breath. “I'll make sure of it.”

Deku made a noise of frustration in the back of his throat.

“This isn't something you can just will away with stubbornness!” Deku's voice was laced with frustration, rising to that- also familiar, higher octave where Katsuki's gotten under the other's skin. It's oddly pleasing to know no one else can get the nerd to use that voice. Like a notch in his achievement belt countering the tally board of Deku sneaking up on him.

Deku's winning on that board, but Katsuki tries his best.

“There's a side of the building on the second floor that's completely unoccupied,” Katsuki ignores the other as he talks, a thought he'd been entertaining going to Aizawa about even before this. “I can move my stuff there and go out the back door to avoid people. If I remain a student here at all...”

A hand gripped his shoulder, vice-like, the joint creaking under the flesh.

“Are you... are you *giving up*?!”

Rarely had he heard Deku's voice sound so furious. A different tally board for that one.

A blankness spread through his mind as he tried to figure out what the actual fuck Deku's issue was. He didn't know the police were coming to interrogate him about his involvement with the League of Villains. He didn't know that Katsuki might not have a choice but to leave or if UA would even want him if he was capable of walking away. It was an odd thought... as Deku seemed to be in the know about everything, but this still felt... incongruous.

At least against All Might it had made sense.

Katsuki had been part of Deku's grade too at the time.

Now though...

Exhaustion and confusion hit him; like it always did around the other.

"What's got you so angry, nerd? Aren't *you* the one who's *always* telling me how I'm not fit to be a hero?" Katsuki cracked a manic grin. "Looking down on me, telling me how everything I am, is *wrong*. How my quirk is amazing if only it didn't belong to someone like me? How the only redeeming thing about me is how I. Don't. Give. Up?"

That's when it really clicked.

He hadn't realized it until the words left his mouth.

Right.

Literally the only good things Deku saw about him was how hard he works and that he doesn't give up. And Katsuki was... was giving up. Was he? Was he giving up? The grip on his arm loosened and Katsuki was forced to face a pale Deku.

Tears were brimming in those too bright green eyes and fuck... fuck this shit. Why?!

"Is that... is that really what you think?" Deku whispered. "All this time?! That's how you think I feel?!"

Katsuki moved backwards, hunching his shoulders down, focusing on the bitter, rolling anger there rather than the void trying to wrap around his legs and pull him under. It had always been so much easier to let the anger take hold than to sit around waiting to be tore into. Waiting for the other to go on a rant about how Katsuki should be better than he was.

"I've proved you right, I guess," Katsuki hissed, gesturing to the hospital rooms around them. "Guess the wrong person was given this quirk."

And then death walked through the door. Katsuki swallowed hard as he took in the man in the trench coat and hat whose eyes landed on Katsuki immediately. Deku's eyes followed where Katsuki's line of sight landed, looking between them with wide, confused eyes.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” Katsuki confessed to Deku, all anger gone, voice cracking, the other looking more and more devastated as he spoke. “You win. I give up. I caused All Might’s end and I’m a danger to everyone around me. I don’t know what to do.” Katsuki grabbed at his hair, tugging at the locks compulsively. “Guess I proved you wrong too, huh Deku?” He grinned at the other, who looked terrified. “Guess I do give up.”

“Kacchan...”

“Katsuki Bakugou,” The Detective called- the same one who’d been suspicious of him when he’d dodged questions about Magna. Even then the man had known something was wrong with Katsuki.

“Kacchan!” The other tried to grab his shoulder again, his voice frantic now rather than pained. “What’s... this wasn’t Kacchan’s fault!” Deku snapped at the police officer. He tried to stand in front of Katsuki, but he held his hand out, stopping the other.

“Quit it,” Katsuki told him, soft, for once, when speaking to the other. He didn’t want to deal with Deku’s weird holier than though drama where he tried saving Katsuki for some fucked up nonsense reason. “Stay back, Deku.”

A blank look crossed the other's face at his words.

The Detective had a quirked eyebrow at them before indicated that Katsuki should follow him down the hallway. Katsuki squeezed Deku’s shoulder before lightly shoving the other towards their classmates, all standing at attention down the hall, watching them.

Katsuki turned his back on his classmates and walked forward.

Seeing it running along Katsuki Bakugou very nearly made him falter when he saw the kid.

It was odd to see him again after so many months of pouring over his files. Comparing text messages to timelines. Pulling medical and school records, summer activities and travel timelines from Masaru

Bakugou. Investigating Hero Agencies and potential Villain recruitment buildings, shady businesses, and reputable ones alike.

The Sports Festival Video evidence set up next to some of the stuff they'd found at the bar. Video feedback from the Sports festival's aftermath. He'd followed the trail in every direction he could up until this point without involving Katsuki Bakugou himself.

The confrontation between mother and son sits on his phone at this very moment and there's an itching of guilt there. Despite his best efforts, they had needed a more... direct view of the abuse going on.

Still, he'd willingly allowed that to take place.

It made him wonder sometimes if he was the bad guy in some people's lives. If his actions, no matter how well-intentioned caused grief. He figures in his line of work its inevitable and thinking too hard on it will make him question every decision.

Sometimes he didn't have time to question.

All he can do is hope that the encounter will spare the kid future heartache.

That the line will disappear someday.

Katsuki Bakugou sits across from him in the makeshift interview room. Erasurehead too. The man had refused to allow the meeting to happen any other way and Tsukauchi is more than fine with that. Especially considering...

Tsukauchi is a professional and he's been dealing with facing the lines for years. But it's always hard to see a maroon line. This one is thin. Almost impossibly so. An emotion that the person themselves probably don't recognize in themselves.

It hides behind the other lines along the heart. Lines that 'hide' can mean self-delusion that the emotions don't exist. They can also mean the person has been actively fighting the emotions, pushing them into the back of the mind.

Tsukauchi only sees it because he's *looking* for it.

It's not burgundy; outright suicidal thoughts. Maroon is more raw. Less straight forward. Katsuki doesn't think about taking his life. The emotions are more obtuse than that. Suicide is not a thought the kid

even contemplates.

No.

Maroon is more... a stray lingering acknowledgement of a thought similar to wanting death but not quite there. Perhaps the idea that others might want them to commit suicide. Perhaps being alone for so long that the person wonders if anyone would notice them passing or being reminded one too many times there's no one that wants them around. It could be any number of emotions that might cause that particular line to appear.

But there's no intention Tsukauchi could see... no desire touching or interweaving with that insidious line. It hides behind dozens of thicker, more defining ones. It's only dangerous because it can turn. Shift. And these types of lines are usually violent when they do. Sudden. Shifted because of a tipping point and avoids burgundy all together to shift to the black of death before all lines cease to exist altogether.

It's one that he *will* have to talk to Erasure about.

But one step at a time.

"I'm sorry that we haven't spoken sooner," Tsukauchi tells them. "I can see the stress has taken its toll on you."

Its true. A thick line of exhaustion weaves in a concerning manner around all the kid's organs. Never quite touching the surface. Which means the kid actively hides it. Tucks it away from view of others, where only Tsukauchi can see how deeply ingrained it is. The opposite of Erasure almost to the point of hysterics as all the man's heavy lines dance on top of his skin. Purposefully broadcasting his exhaustion at all times as some sort of shield against social interaction.

Erasurehead's eyes slide towards him slowly, the quick glance at the kid telling him he knows which of them he's talking to.

"What do you mean by that?" The tone is sharp. Concerned lines practically throbbing. The man is well aware of Tsukauchi's quirk. How it works. And he knows Tsukauchi wouldn't mention something like this unless it was something that required immediate attention. It was nice to work with competent heroes- Underground Hero Erasurehead tended to be one of the few to make his job easier, rather than harder.

Tsukauchi meets eyes with Katsuki. A false irritation sits on the kid's skin. A projection. The is transparent though, showing Katsuki is aware it's a shield he's thrust in front of him. A solid line of anxiety runs side by side to it, under the skin almost parallel to the irritation.

"You know what my quirk is. There's no point in trying to put up a front here. Why don't we talk honestly?"

Put the ball in the kid's court. It was always better when dealing with victims to let them be the one to start things rolling and to let them tell things at their own pace. Pressing a victim was not only unlikely to get to the truth faster, but in worst-case scenarios it retraumatized them.

The lines remain fixed in place. But... a new line appears. Uncertain and wary... prodding. The emotions fluctuate as Katsuki tries to figure out what his 'real' intentions are.

He doesn't believe Tsukauchi is here to help him.

He thinks of the tape where Mitsuki Bakugou had told Katsuki the attack was Katsuki's fault. Where she'd screamed at him that they would lock the kid away because he was liable for all of it. How All Might's forced retirement was the kid's fault.

Pity overtook him.

Tsukauchi made sure not to allow his own emotions to show.

It hadn't just been the maroon line when he'd walked into the infirmary.

There had been lines so thick with guilt they had practically been a sheet as they interwove each part of Katsuki Bakugou's body. It was layered over older lines of guilt. Jagged black lines of horror thinly weaving around that thickened with the boy's heartbeat to indicate the pain his own emotions were causing him.

Of course, one didn't need Tsukauchi's quirk to see this.

The stricken look and stiff way he held himself was more than enough to guess at what the kid's emotions were even though it had apparently been nearly half a day since the event. When Tsukauchi announced himself... well, it was like he'd introduced himself as All For One.

Not a pleasant experience.

“Everyone has semi-permanent lines,” Tsukauchi explained quietly, trying to get some of the tension to bleed out. “Of emotions that are... core pieces associated with a person’s personality traits.”

He nodded towards Erasurehead.

“This one, for instance,” his tone turns teasing. “Practically melts with fondness when he sees a cat.”

Now Erasure was the one exuding false irritation. The line around his eyes spoke of the man picking up on what Tsukauchi was doing and the approval along his heart lines told him to keep going.

Katsuki glanced at his teacher, raising a surprised eyebrow at him.

“I have no idea what he’s talking about,” Erasure said stoic, as ever.

It was the smallest smile Tsukauchi had seen on someone in his life, but it was there.

“It’s semi-permanent,” Tsukauchi continued, non-plussed, “because its consistent. The emotion is part of his nature and... there is the chance that it could change, but it’s highly unlikely and not without therapy.”

The teacher’s eyes narrowed on him.

“The Pro’s have attempted to form an intervention for the growing number of cats in his apartment, but we’ve been unsuccessful.”

A line of cheeky delight formed along the kid’s body, weaving along the side reserved for tactical thinking and a much smaller, more playful side that looked sadly neglected. No such emotions showed on the kid’s face though. Katsuki simply leaned in his seat the smallest bit and gave his teacher a gauging look as if to see the cracks.

“This is way off topic,” Erasure said darkly.

The line of delight thickened.

Tsukauchi hummed.

“The Semi-permanent ones tell me a lot about the person I’m interviewing before we even begin to speak.” Tsukauchi relented, but only a little. “Steady lines are emotions that have been lingering for a long time but aren’t necessarily part of you. The fluctuating lines that

make up a person's current emotions tell me a person's intentions and whether they are attempting to deviate the conversation away from themselves because they are displeased with having their personal lives made fun of."

The line of delight escaped in the form of a guffaw the kid tried to hide behind his hand. Mirth ran rampant and the firm line of admiration and respect the kid had for his teacher shining through any time he glanced at the man thickened just the tiniest bit. Especially when Erasure flipped him off.

"I've worked with Erasure for years. The man can vouch for me." Tsukauchi went in for the clencher. "I swear to you I am here to protect you. I'm here to help in any way I can."

The delight vanished in an instant.

The kid's guard was back up.

'I lost him so quickly.'

It was clear.

Any time anyone had ever told the kid they were there to help, they hadn't. Or worse, they had betrayed that trust. Tsukauchi had fucked up by proclaiming that out loud. Worse still, he could see those sharp eyes looking into his soul.

The kid knew Tsukauchi knew he'd fucked up.

If Mitsuki Bakugou was a hunter on the prowl, meticulously choosing her words and body language to corner her prey, then Katsuki Bakugou was the cornered animal whose hackles were eternally raised to strike out at the predator.

And right now, Tsukauchi appeared to be that predator.

Izuku Midoriya paced the hall. His mind arguing with itself as he waited not so patiently for the Detective that had taken Kacchan away from Class 1A. Memories roll like dice in his head, clinking against each other hard enough to chip.

Even as friends, Izuku and Kacchan argued a lot.

“You shouldn’t do that, you know,” Izuku huffed.

Kacchan rolled his eyes at him, moving his trading card edition of Stars and Stripes into the light and grinning.

“Come on Deku, they got to learn some way, right?”

“They don’t know how valuable that card was!” He snapped. “It was meant to trade it for the cards you did.”

Kacchan sighed before turning to him, an unhappy frown on his face.

“Look, they were being jerks, it’s what they deserve.”

“HOW!?” Izuku cried out, incredulous. “They...”

“Didn’t want the card because Stars is a *girl*,” piped in Kacchan, cutting him off. “They didn’t bother to do their research and now they’ve got some lame common version of All Might’s card. That’s not my fault their dumb, Deku.”

“That’s not the point,” Izuku muttered, scuffing his shoe against the ground. “It’s not very hero like to trick people...”

Izuku found himself on his butt, staring up at Kacchan in disbelief, the outstretched hand attached to a face filled with anger.

“WHY do you have to do THAT?” Kacchan snapped, his voice cracking. The other bit his lip and quickly wiped at his eyes. “Why do you have to be such a jerk about everything I do!?”

“Because It’s wrong!” Izuku yelled back, just as upset, before adding more mulishly. “And so is pushing people!”

Kacchan stomped away.

“You can’t run every time I point something out!” Izuku yelled after him.

He sniffled, trying to hide the sound from Kacchan, he moved to

follow when his friend turned back to him.

“Don’t!” Kacchan raised a fist. “If you follow me, I’ll hit you again! Don’t!”

Izuku let out a noise of frustration but stayed where he was at.

They’ve never finished a single argument.

They’ve never resolved anything because Kacchan refused to stick around.

He had to give Katsuki credit where it was due; the way he pulled himself together, shoving his hands in his pockets and forcing his face into a blank, neutral expression was impressive and would certainly fool most.

It was too bad that Tsukauchi could read the hunched shoulders and stiff way he held himself. Defensive but not submissive. Katsuki cocked his head in a motion that meant ‘let’s get on with this.’ Resigned to losing but determined to fight. False Confidence. Imitation. Katsuki Bakugou knew how to present himself as knowing what he was doing. Knew how to hold himself and how to keep eye contact. How to put the power in his court.

But the lines contradicted the body language.

An attempt at control even though he didn’t feel in control.

Where Masaru Bakugou had worry lines that had run deep and numerous, a show that the emotion had become part of his personality over an extended period of time, Katsuki’s was, of all things, anxiety. The bruise like purple, bordering on violet throbbed with a deep seeded hurt that intertwined with the anxiety.

Lines of anxiety ran deeply along the same length and number of veins in the kid but unlike Masaru Bakugou, it barely showed in the kid’s body language. Where Masaru had practically been a brand name for ‘worry,’ Katsuki’s anxiety was carefully hidden among the aggressive body language he attempted to exude. And for most would be very successful in that front.

It was as impressive as it was daunting, obviously trauma based.

The steel of his mother, the knowledge of what to do evident. And there was the need for control... Tsukauchi could see those lines there, but where in Mitsuki the lines were a part of her psychology, a deep seeded, almost sadistic need to be in control of everyone around her- Katsuki's need for control was more internal. Meticulously reigning in his own emotions and body language like a ringleader over a managerial of wild animals. Tucking in instincts and reactions until they looked painfully wrapped around himself.

Aizawa's lines were thick with worry and concern even as his face remained impassive, almost grumpy. The man had a paper under one arm, though it was clear from the lines that the man had forgotten about it. No intent to bring it forward even though the body language with which he held it indicated that it was important.

Or perhaps not relevant to this situation.

If it was he had no doubt it would be shown at some point here.

He was glad the teacher could make it. It was clear Katsuki desperately needed someone who he felt was on his side here even if the reality was that they were all on his side, he had a feeling it would take a lot of convincing to persuade the kid that they weren't all out to get him.

The kid looked like he was trying to do everything in his power to pretend to be somewhere else. Fear crawled along the outer edges of his shoulders. An emotion pushed away. Kept at bay.

The kid folded his arms. Eyes watched him like a hunter even though the kid's lines spoke of being hunted. Feet apart in a fighting stance Tsukauchi could see beneath the table but offset by a tapping foot.

The sight made his heart clench.

"We have a lot to go over. If you need a break, let me know."

The lines flared in what could only be described as a mental scoff of disbelief mixed with indignation even though Katsuki himself hadn't so much as blinked.

"Okay..." Tsukauchi said slowly, a touch of dryness to his voice. "Fair enough. When your lines betray you and tell me you need a break, we'll break."

Katsuki twitched. A sharp betrayed shiver running along the lines directed at himself.

This time it was Aizawa's lines that ran with delight.

"That is useful," the Pro hero said, envy running along his lines. "I don't suppose you'd want to change career fields? Nezu's looking for willing applicants."

"It's a partial breach of privacy," Tsukauchi said in a clipped voice. "I only use my quirk on civilians when the person or others are in danger. Exposing people's thoughts or emotions against their will is the highest degree of emotional betrayal one can get and having someone who knows what you're feeling all the time would induce a level of stress I can't even begin to express here."

Properly chastised, Aizawa nodded in understanding, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I know you only joked about it because you desperately want to help your students and probably feel at a loss most of the time," Tsukauchi acknowledged. "But I cannot express enough just how complicated human emotions are and we often have ten emotions over a single action that interweave in a fashion impossible to decipher what it makes as a whole. What we feel and what we think affect the decisions we make, but it doesn't define the decisions we make. They are not directly correlated in the way most people might assume."

Tsukauchi turned back to Katsuki and blinked in surprise.

Respect sat heavy on a line directly under the surface. The kid was watching him more calmly now. A budding line of trust barely there wove with that line of respect. Oh. Oh that was...

He took a deep breath.

He'd have to remember this. Katsuki Bakugou didn't trust his words, but his actions. His immediate denying to use his quirk against the student's privacy had been more powerful than his flowery words claiming protection and safety.

"Katsuki Bakugou," Tsukauchi said, more officially to get this started. "Can you tell me when the harassment started?"

Erasure had been informed vaguely of what was going on, of course, but the tense lines going from beneath the surface to above the surface

of his skin told him he didn't know much.

The kid shrunk into the chair.

"The text messages started coming after my internship with Jeanist."

Tsukauchi nodded.

"The texts are certainly a big part of the harassment, but I meant what was the first thing to occur directly after the Sport's Festival."

Katsuki frowned down at the table even as Erasure's brows furrowed, lips pressing together to keep him from interrupting. Alarm and a need for answers tightened like a coil in the teacher's body.

Katsuki shrugged.

"I'm sorry, I'm going to need you to verbalize the answer for this," Tsukauchi said, a lump in his throat. Fuck. He hated working with children. It was so much easier to make demands like this to adults.

Katsuki's face scrunched up and he shrugged again.

"Someone threw food at me as I was leaving the stadium."

It was said in a mumble. Soft. Lacking all anger or agitation. Just a bone deep tiredness along the lines.

"Did you see who?" he prodded gently.

Katsuki shook his head.

"I wasn't paying attention," the kid admitted. "Just someone from the crowd. They were all looking at me like..."

Silence.

"Like what?" Erasurehead asked, voice gentle despite the rolling emotions moving like waves through his lines.

Katsuki's face darkened, and a bitterness throbbed around the kid's heart lines.

"Like I was diseased."

Tsukauchi closed his eyes.

This was going to be a long talk.

“Midoriya, maybe you should...”

Iida’s voice cut off as Izuku sent his friend a glare.

“I think we should let him pace,” Uraraka whispered, voice frantic, bobbing her head anxiously as she pulled Iida away from him. His friend’s hand was still outstretched, as if Iida had planned on putting his hand on his shoulder.

“I... yes, that might be for the best,” Iida said weakly, allowing himself to be pulled along. “It’s going to be okay though, Midoriya. I’m sure nothing’s going to happen to...”

“I don’t think that will help right now,” Uraraka told Iida a bit more harshly.

Izuku wrung his hands as he paced.

“Aren’t you the one who’s always telling me how I’m not fit to be a hero?” Kacchan cracked a manic grin. “Looking down on me, telling me how everything I am is wrong. How my quirk is amazing if only it didn’t belong to someone like me?”

How could Kacchan think that?

Izuku had never said anything like that! Never. How had this happened. He covered his mouth to keep from muttering. That was the last thing anyone needed right now.

How could...

As kids they’d...

Kacchan had *always* been his hero.

“Hey.”

Eight-year-old Izuku looked up, wiping tears from his eyes as he tucked the letter from his dad away to where no one could see it. Kacchan stood, staring down at him through bangs that had gotten too long again.

“There’s an app where you can send your dad dog shit to his apartment. We can see if they deliver internationally.”

“Kacchan!”

He couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s anonymous so you wouldn’t even get caught!” Kacchan added, as if that were the part Izuku might be worried about. “How about it?”

Izuku shook his head, staring at the ground.

“No. It wouldn’t be right.”

Kacchan huffed.

“You’re such a pussy. Sometimes people deserve a little payback.”

“Doesn’t make it okay, Kacchan.”

The other shrugged, looking annoyed.

“Have it your way, nerd.”

Christmas day three boxes of shit arrived on the front of Hisashi Midoriya’s porch in America. He’d never admit it to Kacchan, but his mom’s laughter when she heard the news did make it okay. Amazing even. It had been a long time since anything concerning his dad had made her laugh like that.

Kacchan might not always act like a hero but...

He was Izuku’s hero anyways.

...

...

Izuku tried to remember if he’d ever thanked Kacchan for that. Maybe not like... thanked him for doing the bad thing per say but... he’d thanked him for... for trying in his own way to make things better, right?

He’s always told Kacchan how he’s felt... how amazing he thinks Kacchan is. How could that have been misconstrued?

Izuku heard a crack.

He looked down and grimaced as he saw the tile on the floor had cracked under his green lightning laced foot.

He should probably do this outside.

They were meticulous.

Tsukauchi had them go through each incident Katsuki could remember on his track to school and his train rides. They went through the incident with his local convenient store and his trip to buy shoes.

They went into extreme detail on what happened at Best Jeanist's Agency. Something that had Erasure nearly standing out of his seat and a look of hot anger crossing his face.

It was clear to Tsukauchi that they *could not* do this in the course of one talk. Already the kid looked sick to his stomach. Lines a deep worrying grey.

But there was something the kid was hiding.

An incident somewhere that left the kid's skin ashen with lines.

'We haven't even touched on the text messages yet,' Tsukauchi thought in exhaustion.

Tsukauchi opened his mouth to ask when the heartache line throbbing around the kid's organs burst.

Alarmed he reached across the table, feeling terror at the hollow look that overtook the kid.

"I want to ask a question!" Katsuki barked out.

The kid's hands were shaking and he quickly moved them under the table, looking anywhere but at them.

“Sure,” Tsukauchi said immediately. “I’m sorry, I should have made it clear that you have every right to any questions you might have about what’s going on.”

The kid swallowed.

“I know I’m not...” Katsuki looked up, finally, biting his lip hard. “Maybe it’s obvious.”

The kid barked out a harsh laugh that had Erasure looking alarmed.

The teacher couldn’t see all the dangerous cracks though.

The way the kid’s lines were so strained.

Long term trauma and exhaustion so obvious that it’s hard to miss the kid is barely keeping it together.

“It is obvious,” the kid whispers. “I get why they thought I would be a Villain, but even if I joined them... why? What was so important about... about...”

The kid didn’t have the words. Exhaustion had robbed him and the poisonous emotions running rampant was overwhelming his body in a black mess of depression violently tugging everything in.

“Why did they go through all the trouble to mount an attack just to kidnap a high schooler?” Tsukauchi verbalized. “Why take a hero student when there are so many Villains to choose from for recruitment?”

Silence.

Then, a tiny nod.

“We’ve done a psychological analysis on Tomura Shigaraki – as best as we could, based on video feed and witness testimony as well as our interrogation of Muscular, Mustard, and Moonfish there are two primary reasons why Shigaraki wanting you specifically. The first being that Tomura Shigaraki genuinely saw himself in you- a victim of heroes.”

Katsuki’s brow furrowed in confusion and the lines matched.

It made Tsukauchi’s own heart tighten at the lack of recognition.

The League never stood a chance taking this route because the kid

didn't see himself as the victim at all. The kid blamed himself for the events. Not the adults truly responsible for his suffering.

"Tying you to a podium was monstrous," Tsukauchi told him, in no uncertain terms, "putting a muzzle around your face and chaining you to the stage was horrific. An inhumane crime that's gone unpunished by the law because of loopholes the school has exploited to protect itself and because of All Might's presence at the award ceremony- a man who no one would dare question the actions of."

'And your parent's failure to protest the event or press charges.' He does not add. That's a discussion for another time.

A wide variety of emotions moves like the ocean along the kid's body.

A deep seeded pain that's been pushed down and ignored.

The kid shrugs.

Not because he means it as a dismissal, but because there's hurt lines that speak of being ignored or abused when it's been brought up. There's wariness in those hurt lines. An expectation that the tables are going to turn on him.

"I've already put in the paperwork for Midnight, Cementoss, and Toshi... All Might's teacher license to be suspended."

The 'crack!' sound comes from the kid's neck snapping up so fast to stare at him.

"I have limited abilities here," Tsukauchi warned him. "But the suspension will have a requirement for therapy and proper care towards children's mental and physical health attached to it before they can get their license back. I was able to get all three to move forward because All Might himself vehemently agreed to the terms, forcing Nezu and the other's hands."

Nezu had tried to claim that while he agreed, the danger of the League and the Media against them made this the wrong time to make such a move. Tsukauchi had been less than impressed. There would always be reasons for not doing the right thing and the principal should know that better than most.

The kid looked vulnerable. His lines all showing disbelief and mistrust, even bewilderment at his actions.

“For what it's worth, Bakugou,” Erasure said, looking troubled. “I agree with what he's done.”

The boy dipped his head down; those wavering emotions volatile as they attacked inwards still.

“The Sludge incident was also a gross act of mishandling on the heroes part.” Tsukauchi went on. “The Sludge Villain was being actively hunted in the area and yet no heroes whose quirks could handle the Villain were called. They relied on rumors that All Might passed through the area each morning on his way to the school and while All Might did indeed take up the hunt, it was mere happenstance. You could have been murdered because of that neglect. The heroes on the scene tried one direct means of getting to you and then no other attempts were made. It was sloppy, dangerous, and amateurish for heroes who have been in the business so long. Mount Lady and Kamui Wood, at least, had their debut as heroes only a few weeks prior and their mistakes are slightly more understandable. The others neglect can only be seen as endangerment to the civilians in the area though and I assure you, I have gone to much lengths to make sure they suffer probation.”

“That...” Katsuki swallowed. “That was almost two years ago now though.”

“Something should have been done then,” Tsukauchi said sternly. “But allowing it to go unpunished now means they won't recognize that it was wrong nor the consequences that have come because of it.”

“Consequences?” Katsuki whispered, brows furrowed.

Tsukauchi studied Katsuki Bakugou's lines hard as the kid peaked up at him through too blonde bangs.

“You don't trust the heroes to protect you. I don't blame you. The lines of abandonment and distrust sit right next to the dangerous level of self-reliance you have. You have no support lines at all. You have admiration for Erasure, trust even, but the very idea of relying on him simply doesn't exist for you.”

Aizawa's alarm skyrocket. Eyes widening and body tensing to match the protective line that tries to reach out.

Katsuki met his gaze steadily.

No denial of this either through his body language or his lines.

“Your distrust is older than the incident, but I have little doubt these incidents are part of the reason why its so thick and has made itself at home as one of your semi-permanent lines. The gaping lack of familiar support lines suggests they’ve never existed as anything but temporary fluctuating emotions towards others if that. Though...”

Tsukauchi squinted.

“There is an odd single sliver of a thread of acknowledgment you feel towards one person at least. A steady foundation you feel will always be there no matter what that reassures you even if you will never rely on it.”

Katsuki scowled, keeping his mouth silent on the matter.

The sliver of a thread, barely perceptible at all, looked iron-strong. An odd green color interwoven with a great deal of negative and positive emotions.

He wondered if it perhaps was Masaru.

Uraraka had asked Izuku once- more than once, why he didn’t just avoid Kacchan altogether.

She and many others were genuinely baffled how they could have ever been friends and neither he nor Kacchan had ever explained what it was that had broken their friendship in the first place.

This too wasn’t fair.

Because only Kacchan knew the answer.

“I’ve proved you right, I guess. Guess the wrong person was given this quirk.”

Izuku screamed, bellowing out into the open air and scaring a few nightmares into the heads of a few business students walking by in the distance.

“HOW are you such an IDIOT!?”

It said a lot that he wasn’t sure if he was referring to himself or Kacchan.

He was shaking.

Izuku tucked both his hands under his armpits, trying to stem how hard his body was vibrating.

He remembers one of their last conversations they'd had as friends before things went downhill. One that had always lingered in the back of his mind as out of place.

"Hey Deku," eight-year-old Kacchan asked him. "What kind of hero do you want to be?"

"Like All Might," Izuku had said automatically.

Kacchan made a face.

"Duh, but... you can't BE All Might dummy. You got to start somewhere."

He'd frowned, thinking long and hard about it as they carefully folded paper airplanes.

"I want to be a hero who always smiles for people," Izuku had told him.

Kacchan had quirked his lips up and smirked.

"That's gonna be kind of hard if you're always crying, Deku."

Izuku huffed.

"Well then, what kind of hero do you want to be?" He muttered mulishly.

Kacchan held up his airplane, it was way more complex than Izuku's with a cool, complicated looking tail. The other was staring at it intently. An odd look on his face.

"I want... to be myself."

"What...?" Izuku had leaned forward, trying to figure out why his friend looked so sad all of a sudden. "Aren't you yourself all the time? Of course, you're gonna be yourself when you're a hero. Who else would you be?"

"The best..." Kacchan muttered.

“Well, of course! You’re the best at everything.”

Something flickered over Kacchan’s face then and his friend threw the airplane. It sailed across the room in a perfect arc. The tail helping it turn in the air as it soared to a soft landing.

“WOW! Can you teach me how to make that one?” Izuku begged.

No response.

Kacchan’s face was blank as he continued staring at the airplane.

“Kacchan?”

The other went back to folding airplanes on the table, ignoring Izuku even when he called him, quieter and quieter each time until Izuku wilted and focused on his own, sadder looking places, trying to copy what Kacchan was doing from a distance.

Izuku doesn’t know why that conversation- that afternoon feels so stark against the countless times they’d hung out. It wasn’t the last time they hung out, just the last time Kacchan had talked to him like that.

There was a feeling like he’d missed a step somewhere. Like Kacchan had seen or understood something he didn’t. It was the same feeling when the adults were purposefully keeping something from him- but Kacchan seemed to know.

Like Izuku was too dumb to pick up on what was going on.

One step behind.

Always.

Like now.

Seeing Kacchan outside like that. Lost in his own head. Attacking and fierce but not seeing any of them. Trapped somewhere Izuku couldn’t follow. Again.

He’d thought...

When Kacchan had promised not to tell anyone about where he’d gotten his quirk... Not that Izuku ever had any doubt. Kacchan would never betray him like that. There was a dead certainty he had in that fact.

He'd never once questioned it.

Which was why... it was why he hadn't hesitated that day... their first day at UA telling Kacchan that he'd gotten his quirk from another. Because... despite everything he trusted Kacchan.

Implicitly.

It was an unsaid thing between them that anything spoken when it was just the two of them would never be told to another. In that, it had always been the case. Whether that was secretly feeding a one footed duck or talking heroes or making sure the other was safe- even if that didn't' extend to Kacchan himself.

Even if they weren't friends.

There was trust there.

An odd sort of kind of fucked up but still hard as stone and unbreakable type of weird bond that neither wanted to acknowledge most of the time though Izuku had tried to on the rare occasion.

They didn't talk about it.

Even when they really should.

This was always hard to do. The part of the complicated case where kids were involved. Tsukauchi felt old as red eyes bore into him.

He wished he could be gentle.

"The second reason he wanted you specifically is because you called attention to yourself when you took down Kurogiri right in front of him during the USJ attack. You found the man's weakness with only a brief moment encounter with the Villain. That, coupled with your varied ability to use your quirk at the Sport's Festival drew Shigaraki's attention to you."

Both teacher and student blinked owlishly at Tsukauchi.

"At first, I thought there must have been something about your quirk that drew the man, but all of my sources say that Shigaraki wanted

you for your tactical abilities, not for the power of your quirk. He connected with you because of the wrongs down upon you, but it was your tactical mind he wanted you for.”

‘If the media had even marginally pegged the kid correctly, they would have had a fighting chance.’ Tsukauchi thought grimly. ‘Shigaraki’s fatal flaw was thinking the kid was anything like him.’

Where the Villain had blamed everyone else for his problems the only person Katsuki Bakugou blamed was himself.

“The League’s only tactical advisor was All For One himself.” Tsukauchi continued. “According to the Villain Mustard, Shigaraki told Kurogiri ‘the kid fights like a beast but thinks like Master.’”

The kid blanched. His lines revolting against the comparison like he’d been physically stricken. For the briefest of moments, so quick he’s not sure if it actually happened, the maroon line turned burgundy before fading back. Instead, a vicious alarming red and a thick slab of self-loathing wrapped around the kid so quickly Tsukauchi barely had time to take it in.

And then the kid exploded.

“I AM NOT LIKE THAT MONSTER!” The growling fury and pain was palpable in the air.

Defiance rose up in waves. Hackles rising like a beast ready to attack. The grey nowhere in sight and in its place a fierce fiery passion that encompassed everything. The hopelessness was gone. The depression gone. The pain was gone.

In its place was someone who looked ready to take on All Might himself in his prime just to prove a point.

Tsukauchi was stunned.

“DID YOU HEAR ME!? I AM NOT A VILLAIN. I MIGHT... I MIGHT BE AN AWFUL HERO BUT I’M **NOT** A VILLAIN.”

There were tears brimming in the kid’s eyes.

“Bakugou,” Erasure said calmly despite the volatile upheaval his lines were.

“I know,” Tsukauchi said simply.

He wasn't sure anything else would suffice at this moment.

"I know, kid, it never crossed my mind."

Kid honestly looked like he could take on the world and win in that moment. Jesus. Was this what it was like to face the kid on the battlefield? Fuck that shit. His heart raced as he looked into those eyes, tears falling angrily down his face as he aggressively wiped them away.

He'd met plenty of pros whose cool as a cucumber confidence had let Tsukauchi know he wouldn't win if it came down to a fight. Plenty of Villains too. Never had he come across someone so fierce who'd convinced him without even suggesting a fight might come that he'd lose immediately.

Never before had ALL the lines of a person been simultaneously focused on conveying their words. As if this one thing was the difference between life or death. Tsukauchi swallowed and found himself reaching for his water bottle.

God damn.

"Why don't we break for dinner?" Tsukauchi said weakly.

"I think that's a good idea," Erasure said.

"Do you think the schools going to make another press conference about this?" Iida asked quietly, adjusting his glasses.

Silence sits between Izuku's small group.

"I don't think so," Izuku looked over to find Todoroki had moved closer to him, their shoulders touching. "I don't think Bakugou's in an okay place to handle that. Especially not after what happened to Ashido. And I think the Pros are taking that into consideration."

Sensei was at least.

Izuku didn't feel reassured by the police presence though.

"Has anyone seen Bakugou's parents?" Iida asked, out of the blue.

Half their parents had come to see them at this point. They'd listened to Ashido lie through her teeth about how she'd been injured. Not one person in the room corrected her. They'd all gone along with it as she told them about a training accident that took place during the walls going up.

"There not coming," Izuku said quietly.

"Why not?" Uraraka asked, brows furrowed.

Izuku pressed his lips together.

His own mother had taken three hours to calm down this afternoon and convince her it wasn't necessary. That Izuku himself hadn't been injured in any way and carefully avoiding mentioning Kacchan.

"It's not really something they do," Izuku mumbled. His classmates gave him weird looks. Like everything else between him and Kacchan though, he doesn't explain, just goes back to looking at the locked door down the hall and thinking about other times the Bakugou's hadn't shown up.

...

"For highest GPA in our science Department, Katsuki Bakugou!"

Izuku grinned as Kacchan stepped away from him to accept the award.

"Pfft," Milo muttered on Izuku's other side. "Go figure. The guy breathes in the direction of an assignment and its perfect. He doesn't even have to try."

"It's a good thing he's such an asshole," Akane smiled sharply as she waved to Kacchan from their line. "Makes it a little easier for the rest of us when no one actually likes him."

Izuku shot them an angry look.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be his friends?" He hissed.

"Bakugou doesn't *have* friends," Milo snorted. "Come on, even he knows that."

Milo tilted his head to the stage where Kacchan was accepting the trophy with a bored expression on his face. Izuku bit his lip.

“He calls *everyone* extras,” Akane said, shrugging. “Except for *you*, Deku, but be honest, that’s worse. At least we’re not *useless*.”

The words stung but he couldn’t deny them.

“Come on, Deku,” Kariage prodded him. “You’re the only one dumb enough to get on his bad side.”

That was true.

One time, Kacchan won every prize in a claw machine just to make sure the guy behind him didn’t get the one prize he wanted because he tripped Kacchan two days beforehand. Someone else had once *purposefully* sneezed on Kacchan’s neck and- okay, the scandalized look on Kacchan’s face was perhaps one of the funniest things Izuku had ever seen, but the guy ended up with gelatin oozing out of his locker every morning for three weeks and a shoulder check every time Kacchan saw him for *six months*.

Kacchan came back, slumping into place beside Izuku, hands in pockets.

Milo whistles.

“Man, isn’t that like your tenth award so far?” sounding impressed.

Kacchan grunted, looking like he could honestly care less. Izuku gave a strained smile.

“Congrats! Kacchan!”

Red eyes slid toward him unimpressed, making Izuku shiver.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kariage added. “Congrats, man, reigning champion and all that.”

“For highest GPA in our English department, Izuku Midoriya!”

“YAY IZUKU!”

Izuku blushed as his mother waved frantically, a grin on her face.

He heard snorts of laughter around him, making him blush further.

“Could you be more pathetic?” Milo whispered. “Jesus, she’s like your own personal cheerleading squad.”

“She’s the only one in his court,” Akane pointed out airily, the sharp undertone betraying the intent to hurt. “It’s good that little *Deku* has someone there for him when no one else ever will be.”

Izuku walked forward, hoping... begging Kacchan to say something. Anything in his defense. No harsh words or rasping voice had anything to say though.

“Jeez, it’s like watching a walking mugshot, loosen up, Deku!” Someone taunted from the sidelines.

He kept walking, trying to keep his head high and smile for his mom as he saw her camera flashing in his direction. He stumbled into the principle to the sound of snickers. The man smiled at him in a strained way, steadying him. He took the award and walked back just as awkward.

“Dumbass,” Kacchan muttered under his breath as he took his place by the other. “You’re supposed to shake his hand!” He jerked, looking up at the principle who’d tucked his outstretched hand back by his side. Kacchan side eyed him. “Your second in the school,” his old friend hissed at him. “Act like it.”

Izuku sent him a short glare.

“It’s not like I’m *trying* to mess up,” he hissed.

“That just makes it worse.”

“You are such a jerk.”

Kacchan rolled his eyes and Izuku stuck his tongue out at him, earning a glare from a nearby teacher.

How did they always catch him?

“They’re glaring because the principle called your name again,” Kacchan muttered, still somehow managing to look straight ahead, his lips barely moving.

Izuku yelped as he moved forward. This time he remembered to shake the man’s hand, but the snickers weren’t just coming from his classmates this time. Some of the parents in the crowd had their

hand's covering their mouth. Izuku felt an intense need to let the ground open up and eat him.

A few other names were called out, giving him and Kacchan a break from the hand shaking and the glares of their classmates. What a nightmare. His eyes lingered on his mom. At least she was enjoying herself. He could sit here and take it if it meant his mom was happy.

He looked around for Aunt Mitsuki and Uncle Masaru but they were both absent. He craned his neck, thinking he missed them, but... they weren't there. His brow furrowed. This was their graduation from elementary school to middle school... he knows his mom told them about it even if Kacchan hadn't.

They had to be here though.

The elementary school was far too far to walk here from where they lived. They must have gone to the bathroom or something. Still... he felt unsettled.

"Kacchan, where's..."

"Shut up."

Izuku blinked owlishly.

"But..."

"I said shut up, Deku."

"Ranked number one in academics, athletics, and quirk control, I'm pleased to present to you KATUKI BAKUGOU!" The principle grinned widely as Kacchan walked back onto the stage with an annoying amount of poise and a wide grin that was sharp at the edges. Izuku clapped along with everyone else, eyes still searching.

But the Bakugou's never showed up.

"Izuku sweetie! Stand still for me a moment!"

He'd gotten second, of course, that's how it had been since he and Kacchan had started school. He held up all of his awards awkwardly and grinned as she took more pictures, ignoring his classmates who rolled their eyes or sneered in his direction. Not too far from him, he saw Kacchan shoving all his awards carelessly in his backpack and slinging it over his shoulder as he headed towards the exit.

“Kacchan!” Izuku called, waving his arms back and forth. The other’s shoulders hunched and Kacchan sent him a glare as he looked over his shoulder at them. “You need a ride back home?”

Everyone’s attention was drawn to them now.

Izuku winced as people started to whisper. Not just their classmates but the parents as well. It was at this moment that his mom looked around, brows furrowed and seemed to realize for the first time that Auntie Mitsuki and Uncle Masaru weren’t here.

“Katsuki, honey, come here.”

It was a demand.

Izuku hunched as he realized he might have gotten Kacchan in trouble somehow. Especially when that glare that had been mild before, no more than a slight warning, turned angry.

Kacchan stalked over, slinking into the spot in front of Inko like it was a death sentence.

“Honey,” Inko said softly. “Are you here by yourself?”

Kacchan scoffed.

“Of course,” Kacchan simpered. “Why would my parents come to something so dumb?”

Izuku clutched his awards tightly.

That wasn’t fair.

Maybe this stuff wasn’t important to Kacchan but that didn’t mean he had to be a jerk about it to the rest of them.

“Oh Katsuki,” his mom whispered.

And then before either he or Kacchan could react she wrapped him in a hug. Fierce and long and right in the middle of all of their classmates. The whispers got louder. None of it sounded good.

“You did so well. Why don’t you take your awards out and I’ll take a picture of you with them?” Inko asked, squeezing Kacchan tightly to the point his feet lifted off the ground a few inches before putting him down.

"I don't need pictures taken. This is all dumb stuff. It's nothing important," Katsuki scoffed. "And I don't need a ride! I can walk."

Kacchan tried to pull away, but Inko held tight.

"Katsuki, I'm taking you home. That's not a debate. Now, are your parents at the office?"

Silence reigned between them with Kacchan looking anywhere but them.

"...yes."

Inko frowned, not convinced in the least.

"Katsuki, where are your parents?"

Kacchan stared at them blankly.

"At the office," Kacchan said, no longer hesitant. "Working on a project."

"So, if I call them, they'll tell me that?" Inko demanded.

Izuku was lost. Where else would they be? Why would they not be here otherwise?

"They're working," Kacchan reiterated. "Call if you want."

"I will."

They hadn't answered.

Kacchan had stayed at their home for two days after that and when Auntie Mitsuki had come to pick Kacchan up, his mom and Aunt got into the nastiest argument Izuku had ever heard.

Kacchan never spent the night at their home again.

It was a while before Auntie Mitsuki started coming around the house again. Things got worse between him and Kacchan though he wasn't sure why. There was an anger there that wasn't before. Something that sat between them like an angry beast willing to snap any time Izuku made a wrong move.

He hated it.

And then the Mall incident.

'I hate you.'

Izuku missed something along the way. He *missed* it and whatever it was, no matter how hard he searched, he couldn't seem to find it. Asking Kacchan seemed to only aggravate the other. As if the very idea that Izuku didn't know... didn't understand infuriated him.

He *would* talk to Kacchan about all of this... one way or another. They'd been standing on either side of a stagnant wall for years, beating their knuckles and screaming at iron, towering beast of a wall without ever making a dent.

But they'd both come so far.

And both of them could make that wall bend now.

Izuku looked up at his friends who met his steady gaze.

"We're not the same as we were before," Izuku said softly. "They aren't getting him this time."

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